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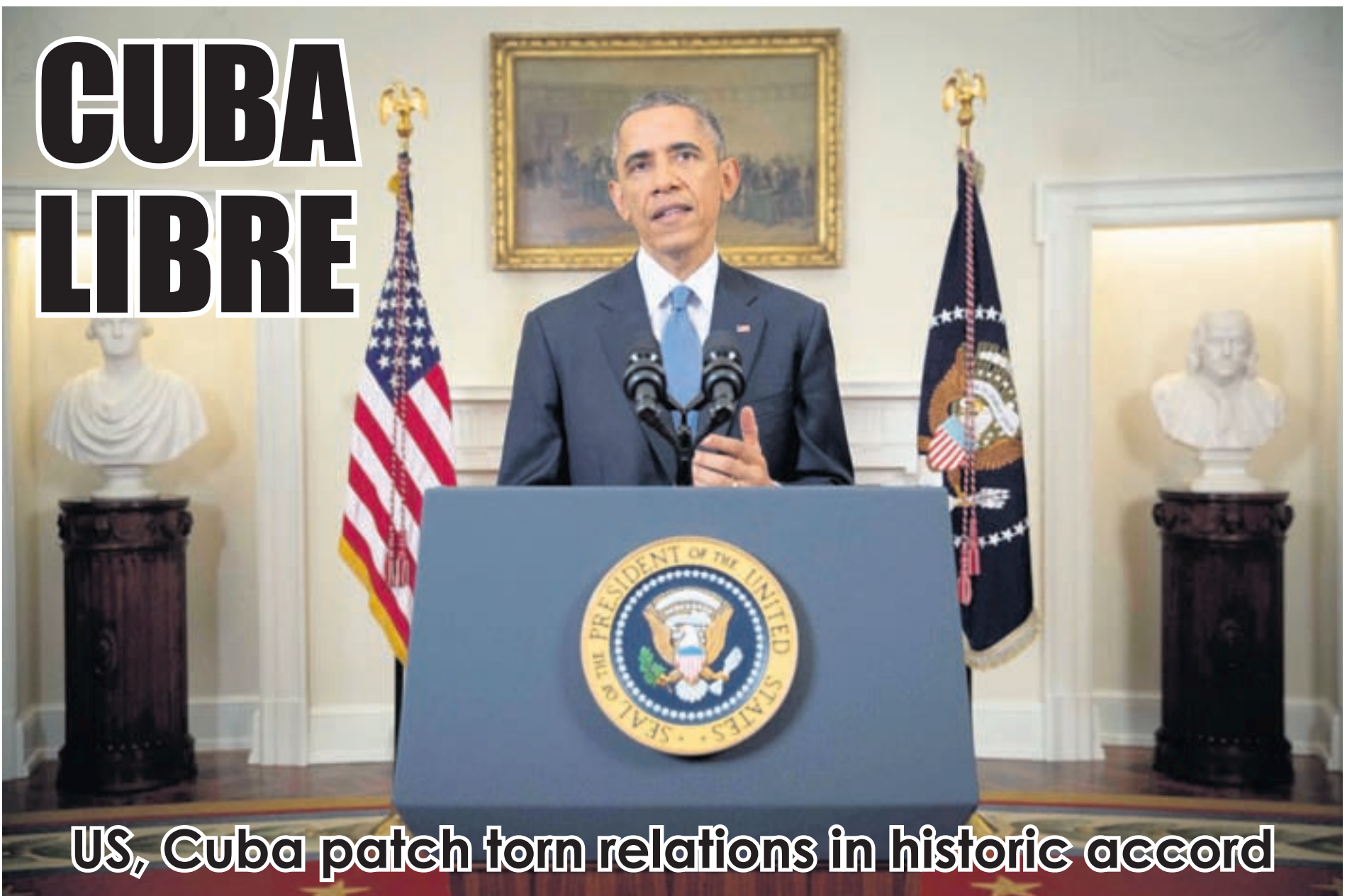


GUINNESS WORLD RECORD ATTEMPT AT LING & SONS

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Aruba TODAY

On Top Of The News Email: news@arubatoday.com website: www.arubatoday.com Tel: +297 582-7800 Thursday, December 18, 2014



CUBA LIBRE

US, Cuba patch torn relations in historic accord

President Barack Obama speaks in the Cabinet Room of the White House in Washington, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, to announce the U.S. will end its outdated approach to Cuba that has failed to advance U.S. interests.

(AP Photo/Doug Mills, Pool)

**JULIE PACE
MATTHEW LEE
Associated Press**

WASHINGTON (AP) — After a half-century of Cold War acrimony, the United States and Cuba moved on Wednesday to restore diplomatic relations — a historic shift that could revitalize the flow of money and people across the narrow waters that separate the two nations.

President Barack Obama's dramatic announcement in Washington — seconded by Cuban President Raul Castro in Havana — was accompanied by a quiet exchange of imprisoned spies and the celebratory release of American Alan Gross, a government contract worker who had been held in Cuba for five years. The shift in U.S.-Cuba policy was the culmination of 18

months of secret talks between the longtime foes that included a series of meetings in Canada and the personal involvement of Pope Francis at the Vatican. It also marked an extraordinary undertaking by Obama without Congress' authorization as he charts the waning years of his presidency. "These 50 years have shown that isolation has not

worked," Obama declared at the White House. "It's time for a new approach." Obama spoke as Castro was addressing his nation in Havana, where church bells rang and school teachers paused lessons to mark the news. Castro said that while the U.S. and Cuba remain at odds on many matters, "we should learn the art of living together in a civilized manner

in spite of our differences." Obama's plans for re-making U.S. relations with Cuba are sweeping: He aims to expand economic ties, open an embassy in Havana, send high-ranking U.S. officials including Secretary of State John Kerry to visit and review Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism.

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US, Cuba patch torn relations in historic accord

Continued from Front

The U.S. also is easing restrictions on travel to Cuba, including for family visits, official government business and educational activities. But tourist travel remains banned.

revoke it. That appears unlikely to happen soon given the largely negative response to Obama's actions from Republicans who will take full control of Congress in January.

"Relations with the Castro regime should not be revisited, let alone normalized,

United States of America and Cuba to establish diplomatic relations, with the aim of overcoming, in the interest of the citizens of both countries, the difficulties which have marked their recent history."

In Cuba, a sense of euphoria spread through Ha-

meant to topple Castro.

A year later a U.S. blockade forced removal of Soviet nuclear missiles from Cuba in a standoff that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war.

Since then, the number of Americans who see Cuba as a serious threat has de-

welcomed the prospect of expanding into a new market. Tom Donohue, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said his organization stands "ready to assist as the Cuban people work to unleash the power of free enterprise to improve their lives."

While Obama has long spoken of his desire to open ties with Cuba, the 2009 imprisonment of Gross, an American government subcontractor, became a major obstacle. Gross was detained while working to set up Internet access for the U.S. Agency for International Development, which does work promoting democracy in the communist country.

Wednesday morning, Gross boarded a U.S. government plane and flew out of Cuba, accompanied by his wife and three U.S. lawmakers.

Waiting for him on board were big bowls of popcorn and a corned beef sandwich on rye.

"This is game changing," Gross declared in brief, emotional remarks later in Washington.

He flashed a broad grin with missing teeth — lost during his imprisonment — after taking an admiring glance at the American flags posted behind him and taking note that his release came on the first day of Hanukkah.

The two nations also released spies that they were holding.

In exchange for the spy's release, the U.S. freed the three remaining members of the Cuban Five who were jailed in Florida. The men, who are hailed as heroes in Cuba, were part of the "Wasp Network" sent by Cuba's then-President Fidel Castro to spy in South Florida.

Two of the five were previously released after finishing their sentences.

U.S. officials said Cuba was taking some steps as part of the agreement to address its human rights issues, including freeing 53 political prisoners and allowing greater Internet access on the island. □



This photo courtesy of Sen. Patrick Leahy's office shows Alan Gross, second from right, with, from left, Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., Sen. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., and Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt. in Havana, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, before departure. On Wednesday, Cuba released Gross, who had been imprisoned for five years, and a Cuban who had spied for the US in exchange, three Cubans jailed in Florida were released by the US.

(AP Photo/Courtesy of Sen. Patrick Leahy's office)

Obama and Castro spoke by telephone Tuesday for nearly an hour, the first presidential-level call between their nations' leaders since the 1959 Cuban revolution and the approval of a U.S. economic embargo on the communist island that sits just 90 miles (140 kilometers) off the coast of Florida. The two men are also expected to meet at a regional summit in Panama next spring.

Obama did not rule out traveling to Cuba before his presidency ends, telling ABC News: "I don't have any current plans to visit Cuba, but let's see how things evolve."

Despite Obama's declaration, the Cuba embargo was passed by Congress, and only lawmakers can

until the Cuban people enjoy freedom — and not one second sooner," said House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican. "There is no 'new course' here, only another in a long line of mindless concessions to a dictatorship that brutalizes its people and schemes with our enemies."

The response from around the world was far more welcoming, particularly in Latin America, where the U.S. policy toward Cuba has been despised.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro called Obama's action "a gesture that was courageous and historically necessary."

The Vatican said Pope Francis "welcomed the historic decision taken by the governments of the

vana as people gathered around televisions to watch the Obama and Castro announcements.

"For the Cuban people, I think this is like a shot of oxygen, a wish come true, because with this, we have overcome our differences," said Carlos Gonzalez, a 32-year-old information technology specialist.

Half a century ago, the U.S. recognized Fidel Castro's new government soon after his rebels took power from Dictator Fulgencio Batista.

But before long things began to sour as Cuba deepened its relationship with the Soviet Union.

In 1961 the U.S. broke diplomatic relations, and then came the failed U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion

clined. A 1983 CNN/Time poll found 29 percent considered Cuba a very serious threat. That dipped to 13 percent in 1994 and 12 percent in 1997.

Under the changes announced Wednesday, licensed American travelers to Cuba will be able to return to the U.S. with \$400 in Cuban goods, including tobacco and alcohol products worth less than \$100 combined. This means the long-standing ban on importing Cuban cigars is over, although there are still limits.

Early in his presidency, Obama allowed unlimited family visits by Cuban-Americans.

The financial impact on Cuba is unclear, though some American businesses



A man waves a Cuban flag while celebrating the restoration of diplomatic relations between the island nation and the United States, Wednesday Dec. 17, 2014. After a half-century of Cold War acrimony, the US and Cuba abruptly moved on Wednesday to restore diplomatic relations between the two nations.

(AP Photo/Luis Hidalgo)

Havana cheers historic renewal of US relations

ANDREA RODRIGUEZ
ANNE-MARIE GARCIA
Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Bells tolled in celebration and teachers halted lessons midday as President Raul Castro told his country Wednesday that Cuba was restoring relations with the United States after more than a half-century of hostility. Wearing his military uniform with its five-star insignia, the 83-year-old leader said the two countries would work to resolve their differences "without renouncing a single one of our principles." Havana residents gathered around television sets in homes, schools and businesses to hear the historic national broadcast, which coincided with a statement by U.S. President Barack Obama in Washington. Uniformed schoolchildren burst into applause at the news.

At the University of San Geronimo in the capital's historic center, the announcement drew ringing from the bell tower. Throughout the capital, there was a sense of euphoria as word spread. "For the Cuban people, I think this is like a shot of oxygen, a wish-come-true, because with this, we have overcome our differences," said Carlos Gonzalez, an IT specialist. "It is an advance that will open the road to a better future for the two countries."

Guillermo Delgado, a 72-year-old retiree, wel-

comed the announcement as "a victory for Cuba because it was achieved without conceding basic principles."

Yoani Sanchez, a renowned Cuban blogger critical of the government, however, said the development came with a price. Castro, she wrote, had made a "bargaining chip" of Alan Gross, the U.S. aid worker who was released from prison Wednesday while the U.S. freed three Cubans held as spies. "In this way, the Castro regime has managed to get its way," she wrote in a blog post. "It has managed to exchange a peaceful man, embarked on the humanitarian adventure of providing Internet connectivity to a group of Cubans, for intelligence agents that caused significant damage and sorrow with their actions."

The Cuban government blames most of its economic travails on the embargo, while Washington has traditionally blamed Cuba's Communist economic policies. Obama had already loosened some travel, trade and financial restrictions that have boosted remittances to an estimated \$2 billion annually, while Castro has ushered in some significant free-market reforms, opening the door to private businesses. The result has been more opportunities for some, and more goods available for those who can pay. □

Cuban exiles divided over Obama changes

LAURA MUNOZ
Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — President Barack Obama's surprise move to re-establish ties with Cuba was applauded by the men and women in a barbershop on Calle Ocho, the heart of Miami's Cuban exile community. Waitresses stopped serving coffee at the El Pub restaurant as Obama spoke on TV. One wiped a tear from her eye as she clasped her hands, overcome with emotion at changes no one believed would come. Only several dozen people attended Wednesday's hastily organized protests in Little Havana following the surprise announcement, a reflection of just how much the Cuban-American community has changed since the Cold War days when the U.S. began trying to isolate Cuba's communist government.

Among them was John Hernandez, holding a "Fire Obama" sign.

"We shouldn't do business with dictators. They're assassins. They have killed

ists said they expected more protests in the coming days. Still, the muted initial reaction to Obama's vows to encourage bilateral flows of people, information and business while working with Congress to end the 50-year-old trade embargo was strikingly at odds with outdated ideas about what most Cuban-Americans want.

It was long thought that no one could win Florida and become president without support from Cuban-Americans dead set against anything seen as supporting Cuban leaders Fidel and Raul Castro. And former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, now mulling a presidential run, has called for a hard line on Cuba.

But Obama won the state twice while promising to improve U.S.-Cuba relations, and he's already taken lesser steps that have drawn significant support from Cuban-Americans.

That support comes in part from the thousands of Cubans who regularly travel between Havana and Mi-

ami thanks to Obama, and behind the scenes lobbying by Cuban-American business leaders who might have opposed such overtures in decades past. "We have long advocated

for steps that improve human rights and opportunity for the Cuban people and which break the isolation between our two countries. The steps taken today by the governments of the U.S. and Cuba are historic," said Carlos Saladrigas, chairman of the business-backed Cuba Study Group. Most of the 2 million Cubans living in the United States call Florida home, and Little Havana has long been the go-to place for demonstrations aimed at isolating the Castros. Cuban artists who tried to perform in Miami were threatened; those who dared perform in Cuba were shunned. But such efforts have faded, and the latest protests tend to draw the same small group of activists.

Recent polls have shown Cuban-American voters in Miami to be evenly divided on the embargo. And while Obama's announcements outraged some Cuban exiles, others were elated.

"It's another betrayal not only of the Cuban people



Anti-Castro protester Don Hernandez chants anti-Obama slogans in the Little Havana area of Miami, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014. Hernandez expresses his disagreement with a surprise move announced by senior Obama administration officials that could pave the way for a major shift in U.S. policy toward the communist island nation.

(AP Photo/Alan Diaz)

Americans before," said Hernandez, whose mother, father and sister fled Cuba in the 1960s before he was born in the U.S. "I feel disgraced."

Local leaders and activ-

ists said they expected more protests in the coming days. Still, the muted initial reaction to Obama's vows to encourage bilateral flows of people, information and business while working with Congress to end the 50-year-old trade embargo was strikingly at odds with outdated ideas about what most Cuban-Americans want.

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America's 113th Congress ends with more fights than feats



Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) talks with reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington. The tempestuous 113th Congress has limped out of Washington for the last time, capping two years of modest and infrequent legislating that was overshadowed by partisan clashes, gridlock and investigations.

(AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke)

ALAN FRAM

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The tempestuous 113th Congress has finally come to an end, capping two years of modest and infrequent legislating that was overshadowed by partisan clashes, gridlock and investigations. "Thank God it's over," Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin said as he left the Capitol late Tuesday.

It's legacy: Just over 200 bills became law during the past two years, according to congressional data. That was the fewest since at least 1947 and 1948, when what President Harry Truman dubbed "the do-nothing Congress" enacted over 900 laws. This Congress did less than

the do-nothing one.

Efforts to revamp the immigration system, tighten gun buyers' background checks and force work on the Keystone XL oil pipeline from Canada to the Gulf Coast all foundered as the Republican-run House and Democratic-led Senate blocked each other's priorities.

Across-the-board spending cuts designed to be so painful that they would force the two parties to negotiate deficit reduction took effect anyway, attempts to overhaul the tax code went nowhere, and each chamber passed a budget that the other ignored.

The partisan impasse was complicated by conserva-

tive tea party lawmakers whom Republican leaders often found unmanageable.

That helped spark a 16-day partial federal government shutdown that was hated by voters and became one of this Congress' hallmarks.

On the last day, the Democratic-controlled Senate confirmed a dozen of President Barack Obama's judicial appointees and sent the White House legislation extending tax breaks for working-class people and special interests alike. An 11th-hour attempt to renew a program obliging the government to cover part of the cost of terrorism-caused losses was sidetracked by retiring Republican Sen. Tom Coburn, who said it was a giveaway to the private insurance industry.

Through two years, the bar for accomplishments dipped so low that routine functions like averting a federal default and keeping government agencies open seemed like crowning achievements.

As if to underscore the turmoil around him, Senate Chaplain Barry Black opened one session last year by praying, "Rise up, O God, and save us from ourselves."

Republicans led congressional investigations of the Internal Revenue Service's mistreatment of conservative groups and the deadly 2012 attacks on Americans in Benghazi, Libya. Both parties decried poor medical care by the Veterans' Affairs Department.

Democrats unilaterally weakened filibusters, the Senate's century-old rule that helps the minority party block action it opposes. Unimpeded, Democrats then confirmed a pile of Obama's stalled judiciary and executive branch nominees.

Before leaving, Congress approved legislation financing federal agencies through September, but not without revolts in both parties.

Clinton denounces torture, says that black lives matter

JILL COLVIN

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Hillary Rodham Clinton said this week she's proud to have been part of an administration that "banned illegal renditions and brutal interrogations" and said the U.S. should never be involved in torture anywhere in the world.

Clinton spoke about the importance of the nation acting in accordance with its values after receiving an award from The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights at a gala in New York.

our adversaries."

Clinton said Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1968, would agree that it's "possible to keep us safe from terrorism and reduce crime and violence without relying on torture abroad or unnecessary force or excessive incarceration at home."

Clinton, a former first lady, New York senator and U.S. Secretary of State, is considering another run for president and is viewed as the likely Democratic nominee if she runs. She was honored at the Kennedy organization's star-studded



Former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks after accepting the Robert F. Kennedy Ripple of Hope Award during a ceremony in New York.

(AP Photo/Jason DeCrow)

"Today we can say again in a loud and clear voice that the United States should never condone or practice torture anywhere in the world," Clinton told the audience. "That should be absolutely clear as a matter of both policy and law, including our international treaty obligations." The remarks marked Clinton's first on the subject since the release of a Senate report last week investigating the CIA's interrogation techniques after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The report has sparked questions about the appropriate use of force in the war against terrorism.

Clinton said that recent world events, including the mass murder of children in Pakistan and the siege in Sydney, Australia, "should steel our resolve and underscore that our values are what set us apart from

Ripple of Hope Award ceremony.

Clinton also addressed the recent protests that have erupted across the country, and drew links between violence at home and abroad.

She wondered what Kennedy would say about "the thousands of Americans marching in our streets demanding justice for all," and "the mothers who've lost their sons."

"What would he say to all those who have lost trust in our government and our other institutions, who shudder at images of excessive force, who read reports about torture done in the name of our country, who see too many representatives in Washington quick to protect a big bank from regulation but slow to take action to help working families facing ever greater pressure," Clinton said.

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Sony cancels 'The Interview' release amid terror threats

JAKE COYLE
AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Under the threat of terrorist attacks from hackers and with the nation's largest multiplex chains pulling the film from their screens, Sony Pictures Entertainment took the unprecedented step of canceling the Dec. 25 release of the Seth Rogen comedy "The Interview."

The cancellation announced Wednesday was a startling blow to the Hollywood studio that has been shaken by hacker leaks and intimidations over the last several weeks by an anonymous group calling itself Guardians of Peace.

A U.S. official said Wednesday that federal investigators have now connected the Sony hacking to North Korea and are expected to make an announcement in the near future. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to openly discuss an ongoing criminal case.

Sony said it was canceling "The Interview" release "in light of the decision by the majority of our exhibitors not to show the film." The studio said it respected and shared in the exhibitors' concerns.

"We are deeply saddened at this brazen effort to sup-

press the distribution of a movie, and in the process do damage to our company, our employees, and the American public," read the statement. "We stand

lease plans for the film." Earlier Wednesday, Regal Cinemas, AMC Entertainment and Cinemark Theatres — the three top theater chains in North

its leader.

Regal said in a statement that it was delaying "The Interview" "due to wavering support of the film ... by Sony Pictures, as well as the

tainment and Carmike Cinemas), Sony was left with little choice.

On Tuesday, the hacking group threatened violence at "the very times and places" showing "The Interview." The Department of Homeland Security said Tuesday there was "no credible intelligence to indicate an active plot against movie theaters," but noted it was still analyzing messages from the group. The warning did prompt law enforcement in New York and Los Angeles to address measures to ramp up security.

President Barack Obama commented the hacking Wednesday in an interview with ABC News.

"The cyberattack is very serious," said Obama. "We're investigating and we're taking it seriously. We'll be vigilant. If we see something that we think is serious and credible then we'll alert the public. But for now, my recommendation would be that people go to the movies."

With a modest budget of about \$40 million, "The Interview" was predicted to earn around \$30 million in its opening weekend before Tuesday's threats. Sony also stands to lose tens of millions in marketing costs already incurred. □



A poster for the movie "The Interview" is taken down by a worker after being pulled from a display case at a Carmike Cinemas movie theater, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, in Atlanta. Georgia-based Carmike Cinemas has decided to cancel its planned showings of "The Interview" in the wake of threats against theatergoers by the Sony hackers.

(AP Photo/David Goldman)

by our filmmakers and their right to free expression and are extremely disappointed by this outcome."

Seemingly putting to rest any hope of a delayed theatrical release or a video-on-demand release Sony Pictures spokesperson Jean Guerin later added: "Sony Pictures has no further re-

America — announced that they were postponing any showings of "The Interview." The comedy, about a TV host (James Franco) and producer (Rogen) tasked by the CIA to assassinate North Korea leader Kim Jung-un (played by Randall Park), has inflamed North Korea for parodying

ambiguous nature of any real or perceived security threats." AMC noted "the overall confusion and uncertainty" surrounding the film. Sony had offered theaters the option of bowing out, and when so many of them did (other chains to drop it included ArcLight Cinemas, Cineplex Enter-



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Fed to be 'patient' about a rate hike; stocks soar

MARTIN CRUTSINGER
AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve is edging closer to raising interest rates from record lows given a strengthening U.S. economy. But it will be "patient" in deciding when to do so.

That was the message sent Wednesday as the Fed ended a meeting amid heightened expectation about a forthcoming rate increase.

At a news conference afterward, Chair Janet Yellen said she foresaw no rate hike in the first quarter of 2015.

The Fed said in a statement that a "patient" approach to raising rates is consistent with its previous guidance that it would keep its key rate near zero for a "considerable time."

Yellen said the strength of U.S. economic data and the level of inflation, not a calendar date, will dictate when it raises rates. At a time of global economic turmoil and collapsing oil prices, she stressed that the Fed was making no policy changes.

"The Fed is sending the message that the broader U.S. economy is on the path toward healing," said Steven Ricchiuto, chief economist at Mizuho Securities. "They don't know how fast it will heal, but it's on the mend." The Fed chair said she's prepared to let the U.S. unemployment rate fall from its current 5.8 percent to exceptionally low levels because doing so could help cause inflation to rise closer to the Fed's 2 percent target.

Uncertainty about when

the economy will fully heal from the ravages of the Great Recession, which officially ended 5½ years ago, is why the Fed's policy statements remain vague, Ricchiuto added.

"There was no signal that

they cause many investors to shift money into stocks in search of higher returns.

Most economists think the Fed's first rate increase will occur in June as long as its inflation outlook doesn't remain persistently below

Wednesday, the government said consumer prices rose just 1.3 percent in November compared with 12 months ago.

But Yellen noted that oil price spikes in the past had only temporarily raised in-



Federal Reserve Chair Janet Yellen speaks with reporters at the Federal Reserve in Washington, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014. The Federal Reserve is edging closer to raising interest rates from record lows given a strengthening U.S. job market and economy. But it says it will be "patient" in determining when to raise rates. The Fed said Wednesday after a policy meeting that such an approach is consistent with its previous guidance that it expected to keep its benchmark rate near zero for a "considerable time."

(AP Photo/Cliff Owen)

rates are on the cusp of lift-off," noted Joseph LaVorgna, chief U.S. economist at Deutsche Bank.

Stock investors cheered the Fed's message. The Dow Jones industrial average, which had been up about 160 points before the Fed issued its statement, roared higher to close up 280 points. The stock market tends to applaud low rates because they make it easier for individuals and businesses to borrow and spend, and

its target rate of 2 percent. In an updated economic forecast Wednesday, the Fed lowered its inflation forecast for next year to between 1 percent and 1.6 percent.

Energy prices have plunged since the Fed last met in October, with oil reaching a five-year low. That price drop is reducing inflation further below the Fed's 2 percent target, which could heighten the pressure to delay a rate hike until inflation rebounds. On

flation and suggested that a corresponding drop will likely also have only a "transitory" effect on inflation. She was more optimistic about the benefits of lower oil prices for the U.S. economy.

"The decline we have seen ... is likely to be on net a positive," Yellen said. "It's something that's certainly good for families, for households. It's putting more money in their pockets... It's like a tax cut that boosts their spending power." □

Sprint is sued over cellphone bill 'cramming'

© 2014 New York Times

WASHINGTON - The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Federal Communications Commission are targeting Sprint in an investigation into whether the company illegally billed customers tens of millions of dollars for unauthorized charges related to premium text messages. The consumer bureau sued Sprint in U.S. District Court in Manhattan on Wednesday, accusing Sprint of operating a billing system that allowed third parties to "cram" unauthorized charges onto consumers' mobile phone bills.

The FCC is conducting a similar investigation, and people close to the investigation said the parties were close to completing a settlement under which Sprint would pay \$105 million in refunds and restitution for the unauthorized transactions. Previously, the FCC, the Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general have participated in lawsuits or settlements with AT&T and T-Mobile over similar so-called cramming charges. The incidents usually involve the placement on customers' phone bills of charges for premium text messages, often in the form of horoscopes or other digital content.

All three mobile companies have been accused of ignoring warning signs that many of the charges were unauthorized, continuing to allow the third-party companies to assess the charges despite thousands of customer complaints. □

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US Financial Front:

American consumer prices fell 0.3 percent in November

JOSH BOAK

AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Plunging gasoline costs pulled U.S. consumer prices lower in November, muting inflation across the entire economy.

The Labor Department said Wednesday the inflation reading fell a seasonally-adjusted 0.3 percent last month, after prices were flat in October. Gas costs plummeted 10.5 percent in November, the steepest decline in nearly six years.

"If you're looking for signs of inflation, you will have to look elsewhere," said Jennifer Lee, an economist at BMO Capital Markets.

Core inflation, which excludes volatile energy and food prices, rose 0.1 percent in November. For the past 12 months, overall inflation has risen 1.3 percent while core inflation has increased 1.7 percent.

Both annual gains are well below the Federal Reserve's 2 percent inflation target. This gives Fed officials who end their policy meeting Wednesday afternoon significant leeway to keep a key interest rate at near zero, which helps infuse the economy with capital to boost economic growth and hiring.

Falling oil prices and a strong dollar, which lowers the price of foreign-made goods, have combined to curb inflation. Prices have barely budged, even though hiring has picked up and the unemployment rate has fallen to 5.8 percent.

The average price of a barrel of oil has dropped below \$56 from a summer high of \$107. That reflects less global demand as Ja-

pan has tumbled into a recession, Europe staves off a slowdown, China manages an economy with less momentum and Russia copes

largely been insulated from these pressures and benefited from less expensive oil. Average gas prices nationally have dropped to

a year ago. This suggests that inflation remained subdued in December and may remain modest in the coming months.

where, often helping to support other sectors of the economy.

Consumer prices did rise last month for medical care, airline fares, alcohol, beef, ham and chicken. But they also slipped for clothing, household furnishings and autos.

The benefits of lower gas prices appear to have spilled over to consumer spending at the start of the holiday shopping season. Retail sales rose a seasonally-adjusted 0.7 percent in November.

Spending on motor vehicles accelerated 1.7 percent, while purchases at clothiers, online retailers, electronics stores and department stores all expanded.

A prolonged rise in consumer spending should eventually push up core inflation.

"We still expect the stronger economy to push core inflation above 2 percent late next year," said Paul Dales, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics.



A shopper enters clothing store Naartjie, inside the Flatirons Crossing Mall, in Broomfield, Colo. The Labor Department reported on November consumer prices on Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014.

(AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

with its collapsing currency. But U.S. consumers have

\$2.53 a gallon from \$2.89 a month ago and \$3.23

Cheaper gas frees up income to be spent else-

US current account deficit rises to \$100.3 billion

JOSH BOAK

AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. current account trade deficit widened slightly in the July-September quarter, largely due to foreign institutions paying less in fines and penalties to the U.S. government.

The Commerce Department said Wednesday that the deficit in the current account rose to \$100.3 billion in the third quarter, up 1.9 percent from a revised \$98.4 billion deficit in the April-June period.

The increase occurred despite a drop in the trade

deficit for goods and services, reflecting cheaper oil prices and a stronger dollar.

The deficit widened because fines collected by the U.S. government from foreign institutions fell to \$27.8 billion from \$40.1 billion in the previous quarter, a 31 percent decrease. In the April-June period, the government had fined the French bank BNP Paribas \$9 billion for violating sanctions against Iran, Sudan and Cuba.

The current account is the broadest measure of trade, covering not only the flow

of goods and services but also investment flows. It faces downward pressure because the dollar has increased in value relative to other currencies and oil prices have fallen by almost 50 percent since June.

The average price of a barrel of oil has dropped below \$56 from a summer high of \$107.

That reflects weakening global demand as Japan has tumbled into a recession, Europe staves off a slowdown, China's economy loses momentum and Russia copes with its collapsing currency. But U.S.

consumers have largely been insulated from these pressures and benefited from less expensive oil.

At the same time, the global slowdown has caused more investors to crowd into the dollar as a relative safe haven. The dollar appreciated 7.1 percent against other major currencies during the July-September quarter.

The current account is still relatively low by historical standards. The quarterly deficits regularly topped \$150 billion in the four years before the Great Recession of 2007-2009.

American Living:

Pampered pets that don duds move to the mainstream



Julianne Hough takes a photo with her dogs wearing matching vests in Washington, DC. For some pet owners, clothing plays into a luxury lifestyle. For others, it's a way to match man's best friend; and sometimes it's simply about keeping animals warm this winter.

(AP Photo/Michael Simon)

SUE MANNING
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — These clothing designers have to think about pattern, fabric and fit — as well as where to put the poo bags.

Creating on-trend outfits is a whole different animal for pet fashion designers, whose work is becoming mainstream as animal lovers look to further pamper their pets.

For some owners, it's a statement; for others, it's a way to match man's best friend; and sometimes it's simply about keeping animals warm this winter. But it's clear the number of dressed-up dogs and cats jumps significantly once holiday photos need to be taken.

"We have gone from the kind of cute reindeer gear or ugly sweater to more functional clothing," said Lauren Darr, founder of the International Association of Pet Fashion Professionals in New York City. "Before it was for a cute picture, now it's more practical.

It takes it to a different level, going from being a novelty to understanding how things can be used in everyday life."

Pet fashion got a leg up after American Eagle Outfitters received an outpour-

ing from its April Fool's Day joke this year. To raise money and awareness for an animal welfare group, the popular retailer introduced a fake fashion line called American Beagle Outfitters.

But the joke was on the Pittsburgh company.

"Our customers were very clear about their desire for this product to become a reality," company spokesman Michael Leedy said last month when welcoming the pet line for real. Its tiny puffy jackets, sweaters and hats sell for \$12.95 to \$39.95.

The move made strides for the pet clothing industry, insiders say.

"When a company like American Eagle starts getting into pet fashion, it really puts a spotlight on it and brings visibility to it," Darr said.

For some pet owners, clothing plays into a luxury lifestyle.

Dog Fashion Spa in New York sells doggy and mommy bathrobes, a matching fad that comes as many spas and salons are building hers and "furs" facilities — one side to pamper the woman and the other to treat their dogs, CEO Elena Volnova said.

Pampering and style is one

thing, but function is also important. Karine Ng, the owner and designer at Central Park Pups in New York City, has developed several step-in coats with hidden harnesses that help pets get dressed without the hassle.

Dogs walk right into the coat, so they don't have to put their head through it. Her pieces are among the many that feature a pouch or pocket to hold unused bags for scooping up pet poop.

Ng's "city chic" styles, which sell online and at boutiques for \$60 to \$65, aim to reduce aggravation for pets, but she warns: "Never make a dog wear clothing if it doesn't want to."

On the other hand, you

might want to start dressing your cat now, Darr said. She predicted huge growth in feline fashions as retailers from 99-cent stores to high-scale boutiques carry more cat clothing.

"I am seeing more pieces that are tailored for cats. It's still a small proportion, but it is growing," Darr said. The movement comes as more owners teach their cats to go for walks. Plus, "a lot of cats in colder climates have learned to rely on sweaters, coats and vests," Darr said.

Other trends she saw this year that she expects to grow in 2015 include clothing decorated with LED lights to make pets more visible at night, T-shirts for pets of sports fans and still more ugly sweaters. □



A beagle wears an American Beagle Outfitters beanie and a puffer vest. For some pet owners, clothing plays into a luxury lifestyle. For others, it's a way to match man's best friend; and sometimes it's simply about keeping animals warm this winter.

(AP Photo/American Eagle Outfitters)



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Pakistani Chief asks Afghans to help find massacre plotters

ISMAIL KHAN

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan - Pakistan's army chief, Gen. Raheel Sharif, traveled to Afghanistan on Wednesday to seek help in locating the Pakistani Taliban commanders who orchestrated the massacre at a Peshawar school Tuesday in which 148 people, mostly schoolchildren, were killed. Sharif and the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence spy agency, Lt. Gen. Rizwan Akhtar, flew to Kabul, the capital, for meetings with President Ashraf Ghani and Gen. John F. Campbell, the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military said.

The sudden trip came as Pakistanis united in horror and grief at Tuesday's assault, in which Taliban gunmen stormed the Army Public School and Degree College, firing randomly, throwing grenades and lining up some students to be executed. Of the 148 fatalities, 132 were students.

Journalists were shown around the blood-splattered school buildings where the killings took place. Clothes, shoes and schoolbooks were scattered about the deserted hallways. One military officer wept as he accompanied a reporter around the scene.

The government declared three days of mourning, the national flag was lowered to half-staff on all official buildings, and prayer services were scheduled across the country.

Pakistan's fractious military and political leaders also resolved to strike back against the Taliban. For the army, that involved pointing to their sanctuary in Afghanistan.

In its statement, the mili-

tary said that Sharif had shared vital elements of intelligence with the Afghan president and U.S. com-

the Taliban, the statement said. There was no immediate reaction from Afghan or U.S. officials in Kabul. A

fore the meeting, said Pakistan possessed hard proof that Tuesday's attack had been coordinated by Tal-

conversation between the attackers and their handler who was across the border during the siege," the official said. "The chief would be demanding action."

Pakistan has long contended that the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, Maulana Fazlullah, is hiding in the mountainous eastern Afghan provinces of Kunar and Nuristan. Last year, Afghan officials admitted to helping Fazlullah, largely as payback for Pakistani support for the Afghan Taliban. But relations between the two countries have visibly warmed since September, when Ghani came to power, and in recent weeks some reports have suggested that U.S. airstrikes inside Afghanistan had targeted Pakistani Taliban leaders.

The other element of Pakistan's militant problem, however, lies within - namely the military's history of favoring some Islamist groups while fighting others. In Peshawar, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said that policy was ending.

"We announce that there will be no differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' Taliban," he said.



The uncle and cousin of injured student Mohammad Baqair, center, comfort him as he mourns the death of his mother who was a teacher at the school which was attacked by Taliban, in Peshawar, Pakistan. Taliban gunmen stormed a military-run school in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar on Tuesday, killing more than 148, mostly children, officials said, in the highest-profile militant attack to hit the troubled region in months.

(AP Photo/Mohammad Sajjad)

mander in Kabul.

Ghani assured the Pakistanis of his cooperation against

senior security official in Peshawar, speaking on the condition of anonymity be-

ibani commanders hiding on Afghan soil.

"The intel monitored the

Kurdish Iraqi forces launch operation in Sinjar

VIVIAN SALAMA
Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Kurdish Iraqi forces launched a major operation Wednesday to retake the militant-held town of Sinjar in northern Iraq, part of a push to secure the road that leads directly to the Syrian border.

Peshmerga forces, backed by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes, moved into the town, which has been under the control of the Islamic State group since August, a statement from the

Kurdish Regional Security Council said. Peshmerga fighters were able to retake at least eight small villages around Sinjar, driving "large numbers" of militants to flee to Mosul and other areas under their control, the statement added.

The U.S.-led Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve said Wednesday it conducted two airstrikes near Sinjar, destroying two militant vehicles, guard towers and a number of IS containers. It also said it conducted

eight airstrikes near Mosul and two airstrikes in the nearby town of Tal Afar.

Peshmerga fighters have worked for months to push back the militant group, which has declared a self-styled Islamic state ruled by its brutal religious views in territory it seized across much of Iraq and Syria. Peshmerga forces said in September that they would focus on Sinjar after liberating the nearby towns of Rabia, Mahmoudiya and Zumar.

Tens of thousands of Sinjar

residents, mainly those from the minority Yazidi group, fled into the mountains in August when the militant group captured the town, then became stranded there for more than two weeks after it was surrounded. Many were eventually airlifted off the mountain or escorted to a safe passageway.

Kurdish television showed images of peshmerga fighters in the mountains cutting off the road that leads from Rabia to the militant-held cities of Mosul and Tal Afar.

Britain's message for UAE visit: Nice, not naughty

ADAM SCHRECK
Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Britain wants to make sure its citizens are more nice than naughty while soaking up the Persian Gulf sun this holiday season.

A social media campaign by British Embassy staff in the United Arab Emirates running this week is a play on the classic poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas," and includes travel advice aimed at keep-

ing unwitting Britons out of trouble.

The rhyme is meant for visitors to the Emirates, an oil-rich seven-state federation of former British protectorates on the Arabian Peninsula. It highlights potential cultural pitfalls through the eyes of a fictional traveler, Stu Nicholas.

"No holding of hands or Christmas kisses; under the mistletoe, despite amorous wishes," goes a festive nugget.

Another says: "So time to

go home after several spirits neat; but it's a crime for Stu to be drunk on the street."

The Emirates' biggest and most cosmopolitan city, Dubai, has the most relaxed social codes in the conservative Gulf region, but foreigners occasionally run afoul of strict decency laws and prohibitions on public intoxication.

British citizens have received jail sentences here after being found guilty of kissing in public and having drunken sex on the beach.

Other foreigners have been prosecuted for exchanging steamy text messages or showing a middle finger to a fellow driver.

The poem is being meted out little by little on Facebook and Twitter accounts operated by Britain's diplomatic missions to the country.

It follows a similar awareness campaign last year centered on the "12 Days of Christmas" that included the tweet:

"On the 5th day of #Christ-

mas my friend said to me; If I have overdone it, please send me home."

Millions of foreign tourists each year are drawn to the Emirates by beaches blessed with nearly year-round sunshine and eye-popping attractions such as the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest building.

More than 100,000 British citizens live in the Emirates, and about a million visit the country each year, according to the embassies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. □

Russians flock to stores to pre-empt price rises

N. VASILYEVA
Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian consumers flocked to the stores Wednesday, frantically buying a range of big-ticket items to pre-empt the price rises kicked off by the staggering fall in the value of the ruble in recent days.

As the government considered ways to ease the selling pressure on the ruble, which has slid 15 percent in just two days and raised fears of a bank run, many Russians were buying cars and home appliances — in some cases in record numbers — before prices for these imported goods shoot higher.

The Swedish furniture giant IKEA already warned Russian consumers that its prices will rise Thursday, which resulted in weekend-like crowds at a Moscow store on a Wednesday afternoon.

Shops selling a broad



People wait in a line to pay for their purchases at the IKEA store on the outskirts of Moscow, Russia, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014. The collapse of the national currency triggered a spending spree by Russians desperate to buy cars and home appliances before prices shoot higher. Several car dealership were reported to have suspended sales, unsure how far down the ruble will go, while Apple halted all online sales in Russia.

(AP Photo/Pavel Golovkin)

range of items were reporting record sales — some have even suspended operations, unsure of how far down the ruble will sink. Apple, for one, has halted all

online sales in Russia.

"This is a very dangerous situation, we are just a few days away from a full-blown run on the banks," Russia's

leadingbusiness daily Vedomosti wrote in an editorial Wednesday.

"If one does not calm down the currency market right now, the banking sys-

tem will need robust emergency care."

Alyona Korsuntseva, a consumer in her 30s, says the current jitters surrounding the Russian economy reminded her of the 1998 Russian crisis when the ruble tumbled following the government's default on sovereign bonds.

"What's pressuring us is the fact that many people (back then) rushed to withdraw money from bank cards, accounts," she says. "We want to safeguard ourselves so that things wouldn't be as bad they were back then."

Consumers are buying durable goods because Russian stocks are too volatile as an investment and an overwhelming majority of Russians cannot afford to buy land or real estate.

The ruble has suffered catastrophic losses this week as traders fretted over the impact of low oil prices on the Russian economy. □

McDonald's in Japan limits orders of French fries

E. KURTENBACH
Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Only small fries with that? McDonald's in Japan is limiting the serving size of fries as stocks run short due to labor disruptions on the U.S. West Coast.

McDonald's began rationing its fries Wednesday morning. It said prolonged labor negotiations with port workers on the West Coast have made it difficult to

meet demand despite an emergency airlift of 1,000 tons of processed spuds and an extra shipment from the U.S. East Coast by sea. Frozen french fries — ready for the deep-fryer — are a leading U.S. export. The spuds are partially cooked and cut before shipping.

Japanese consume more than 300,000 tons of french fries a year, mostly at fast-food restaurants, and largely sourced from imports of

frozen, processed potatoes from America, according to U.S. figures. Shipments in December are expected to be just over half the normal level, Japanese newspapers reported.

But demand is rising as convenience stores are increasingly also selling fries. McDonald's has 3,100 outlets in Japan. It cut prices for set meals to compensate for including only small fries.

Customers expressed disappointment as they left a downtown Tokyo McDonald's outlet on Wednesday. "The kids like the bigger sizes, like M and L, so it's a shame," said businessman Kenichi Kuniki, 45.

Japan's locally grown potatoes are mostly eaten fresh, rather than as fries, and production has been declining for years. But Japan enforces strict limits on where and how fresh pota-

atoes are imported.

The powerful dockworkers union and multinational shipping lines have been negotiating a new contract for about 20,000 West Coast workers. In the meantime, labor disruptions have slowed shipments and driven costs higher.

Japanese are also facing a shortage of butter that has prompted grocery stores to limit shoppers to one or two packages apiece. □

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Israel suffers sharp diplomatic rebuffs from Europe

JOHN DAHLBURG
JOHN HEILPRIN
Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Israel suffered back-to-back diplomatic setbacks in Europe on Wednesday as Palestinians headed to the United Nations to try to set a two-year deadline for an Israeli withdrawal.

In Geneva, the international community delivered a stinging rebuke to Israel's settlement construction in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, saying the practice violates Israel's responsibilities as an occupying power.

The declaration adopted by the conference of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which governs the rules of war and military occupation, emphasized a prohibition on colonizing occupied land and insisted that international humanitarian law be obeyed in areas affected by the conflict between Israel and Palestinians. It called for "all serious violations" to be investigated and those responsible for breaches to be brought to justice.

"This is a signal and we can hope that words count," said Swiss ambassador Paul Fivat, who chaired the one-day meeting. The U.S. and Israel did not take part. Israel's U.N. Mission blasted the gathering, saying: "It confers legitimacy on terrorist organizations and dictatorial regimes wherever they are, while condemning a democratic country fighting terrorism in accordance with international law."

In Luxembourg, meanwhile, a European Union court ordered the Palestinian group Hamas removed from the EU terrorist list for procedural reasons but said the 28-nation bloc can maintain asset freezes

against Hamas members for now.

The Islamic militant group, which calls for the destruction of Israel, hailed the decision, but Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed outrage.

"It seems that too many in Europe, on whose soil 6 million Jews were slaughtered, have learned nothing," Netanyahu said, adding that Israel would continue to defend itself "against the forces of terror and tyranny and hypocrisy."

The EU court ruled that the terrorist listing of Hamas was based on press and Internet reports and not on "acts examined and confirmed in decisions of competent authorities."

The EU, which has two months to appeal, was considering its next step.

In New York, an Arab-backed draft resolution on ending Israel's occupation of lands captured in 1967 was being submitted later Wednesday to the U.N. Security Council for a vote, the Palestinian foreign minister said.

However, minister Riad Malki said the actual vote might be put off, suggesting a compromise is in the works to avoid a clash in



Swiss Ambassador and chairman Paul Fivat speaks to the media during a press conference following the Conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, in Geneva, Switzerland, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014. A declaration adopted by consensus among 126 parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention insists that international humanitarian law must be followed _ and all serious violations investigated _ in areas affected by the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

(AP Photo/Keystone, Salvatore Di Nolfi)

the council.

The current draft, sponsored by Jordan on behalf of the Palestinians, sets November 2016 as a deadline for an Israeli withdrawal from war-won lands the Palestinians are seeking for a state.

Israel fiercely opposes any suggestions that the Security Council can set a framework for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which broke down again in the spring

after the two sides couldn't agree on the ground rules. The United States was scrambling Wednesday to avert a showdown at the Security Council. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was talking to European and Arab foreign ministers about a potential meeting this weekend in the Middle East, possibly with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

In Washington, State De-

partment spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the Obama administration is studying the EU's court decision but the U.S. continues to consider Hamas as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. hasn't said how it would respond to the Jordanian resolution, but Kerry took a hard line in meetings this week in Europe against any effort that could interfere with Israel's elections in mid-March. □

Poroshenko: Ukraine is a new, changing country

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Ukraine's president on Wednesday urged Poland's politicians and business people to intensify ties with his country as it conducts reforms to follow European standards.

At the start of a two-day visit to Poland, President Petro Poroshenko held talks with Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski and Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz.

Kopacz told Poroshenko

that she will speak for neighboring Ukraine during this week's European Union summit that will discuss ways of solving the conflict in the country and of aiding its political and economic reforms. Addressing Poland's lawmakers and senators, Poroshenko said that Russia's takeover of Crimea and the support that Moscow gives to Ukraine's separatists have fortified his pro-Western course, and

asked for continued support on that track.

Poroshenko said he will ask Ukraine's lawmakers to end its status as a non-aligned nation and to pave way for strengthening ties with NATO security structures. He said the aim of Ukraine's reform plan is to be ready to seek EU membership in 2020. Poroshenko said Crimea is an "open wound" but he believes the "Ukrainian flag will fly

over it again."

He later spoke to a forum of Polish and Ukrainian business people. He said Poles must have had bad experiences from dealing with the centralized, corruption-ridden country. "I have good news for you: that country is no more," Poroshenko said because reforms to fight corruption and oversee the decentralization of the administration are underway. □

Australian officials try to figure out how gunman eluded counterterrorism effort

THOMAS FULLER
MICHELLE INNIS
© 2014 New York Times

SYDNEY - The Australian authorities came under increasing pressure Wednesday to explain why the gunman in the armed siege at a Sydney cafe that left two hostages dead was not being monitored despite his criminal record and public

fore he went to the restaurant and took the people there hostage. In April, he was also charged in the sexual assault of a woman in western Sydney in 2002. Forty more counts of sexual assault involving six other women were later added to that case. The police on Wednesday raided the southwest Syd-

day that he had requested police and justice officials to speed the carrying out of laws that would make the criteria for bail more restrictive. The changes to the bail laws were decided well before the siege, but the laws were not to be enforced until next year. The violence at the Lindt Chocolate Cafe also left at



Three Muslim men pray as the public lay flowers at the Lindt coffee shop in Sydney's Martin Place, Sydney Australia.

(AP/Photo/Steve Christo)

airings of his radical views. Prime Minister Tony Abbott said Wednesday that the gunman, Man Haron Monis, "had been of interest to our security agencies" but was not on a government watch list.

"And we want to know why," Abbott said in a radio interview Wednesday morning. "We want to know why he wasn't being monitored."

"The system did not adequately deal with the individual, there is no doubt about that," Abbott said.

Monis, who was fatally shot by the police on Tuesday after the 16-hour siege of a restaurant in downtown Sydney, was facing trial on a number of charges, including being an accessory to the murder of his former wife. He was convicted of harassing families of Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan and lost his final appeal in that case on Friday, three days be-

ney home Monis shared with his girlfriend, Amirzh Droudis, raising questions over whether she might have played some role in Monis' plans.

Droudis has been charged with stabbing and burning to death Monis' former wife last year.

The seriousness of the charges facing Monis and Droudis - Monis' former wife, Noleen Hayson Pal, was stabbed 18 times and set on fire - has led to questions as to why the two were let out on bail.

Daryl Pearce, the magistrate who granted them bail last December, was reported in the Australian news media at the time to have said that bail was a "simple matter of fairness" and that the prosecution's case was weak. Monis argued at the hearing that the Iranian secret service was trying to frame him.

The premier of New South Wales, Mike Baird, said Tues-

least three people wounded. A total 17 people were taken hostage when Monis, armed with a gun, entered the cafe on Monday morning.

Earlier this year, the Australian government introduced a raft of laws in response to what Abbott called a growing threat that the Islamic State, the militant group in Iraq and Syria, would attempt a bold act of terrorism on Australian soil.

The laws, which passed Parliament with wide support, made it an offense to advocate terrorism, barred Australians from going to fight overseas, allowed the authorities to confiscate and cancel passports, and provided for the sharing of information between security services and defense personnel. The government also deployed hundreds of police officers in counterterrorism sweeps across the country. □

Colombian rebels announce cease-fire

ANDREA RODRIGUEZ
Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — Colombia's largest rebel group announced an indefinite, unilateral cease-fire Wednesday, saying guerrillas will refrain from staging attacks so long as they aren't targeted by the U.S.-backed military.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia made the announcement in Cuba at the end of another round of peace talks aimed at ending Latin America's oldest insurgency.

In a statement signed by the FARC's ruling Secretariat, the rebels expressed hope that the cease-fire beginning at midnight Dec. 20th would "transform into an armistice," and said it would seek the support of several Latin American nations and the international Red Cross to verify its enforcement.

Although the FARC have declared temporary cease-fires before, around Christmas and elections, this would be the first time they've offered to indefi-

nitely lay down their weapons nationwide since the 1980s. The goodwill gesture would appear to add at least symbolic momentum to talks that were strengthened when the rebels last month unilaterally freed an army general two weeks after his surprise capture in a remote part of the country. But it remains to be seen whether the government will accept the rebels' conditions. In two years of talks, President Juan Manuel Santos' centrist government has steadfastly rejected a two-way truce, fearing the rebels would use the opportunity to rearm as they have in past. Still, the number of rebel attacks has dwindled notably since 2012, a sign to many that the FARC are negotiating in earnest and an end to a half-century of fighting is within reach.

The two sides have already reached agreements on agrarian reform, political participation for the FARC and how to jointly combat illicit drugs in what was long the world's largest cocaine producer. □

Haiti president meets with opposition

PIERRE LUXAMA
DANICA COTO
Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP)

— Haiti President Michel Martelly met Wednesday with opposition leaders in a bid to stabilize the politically fractious country as pressure mounted on him to appoint an interim prime minister.

The meetings are Martelly's latest response to the recommendations of an independent commission he established to end a stalemate over delayed legislative elections. Among the recommendations was that former prime minister Laurent Lamothe should resign, which he did early Sunday following days of violent protests in which at least one person was killed. "All I have to say is that the meeting went well," Martelly told reporters briefly as Port-au-Prince hotel where the meeting was held. "We agreed to continue the discussion." □

Opposition leaders said they discussed how Martelly could implement the recommendations, which include renewing the membership of the electoral council, and freeing several people the opposition considers political prisoners.

Martelly "must satisfy the recommendations," said Rosemond Pradel, general secretary of the opposition Fusion party.

Two brothers who spent 17 months in prison after accusing the presidential family of corruption were released on Wednesday afternoon.

Martelly's administration also is drafting a list of candidates for an interim prime minister to steer the troubled country through political unrest.

"We need a new government as soon as possible," Senate President Simon Desras told The Associated Press Wednesday in an interview. □



Marriott's Aruba Surf Club rewards Sales & Marketing Excellence

PALM BEACH - A festive gala event in the ballroom of the Marriott Aruba Resort & Stellaris Casino, celebrated achievement in the sales and marketing departments of MVC, Marriott vacation club.

The award ceremony, emceed by the sales and marketing leadership team, with Ron Moser, Ligenne Trimon, Mirna Loefstop and Noanni Cham, was warm and congratulatory, as stars of the department were acknowledged and feted for their accomplishments.

"It gives me great pleasure," said Trimon, at the opening of the evening, "to congratulate every single one of you for your commitment, dedication and determination, having achieved Sapphire status this year. For the ones that did not quite make it in 2014, the good news is that we are starting anew in just two weeks when we usher in 2015, and we hope to see you on stage next year.

For those of you who made it, we appreciate your focus and drive and we are honoring you this evening with recognitions, great food and fantastic dance music with Buleria, wishing you a great time tonight!" Trimon then proceeded to hand out the handsome



Sapphire awards and customary envelopes, together with Mirna Loefstop, to 2014's top-achievers in order of their accomplishments.

Award recipient included Keila Alcantara, Edwina Gario, Eric Andrews, Jacqueline Marlin, Fernando Chumpitazi, Theadjen Giel Violenes, Maroushka Sanchez, Elly Rustveld, Carolina Corrales, Marry Maduro, Ben Pombo and top performer of the group, Gisela Sa, who was also recognized as Chanel Top Performer inhouse and Marketing Executive of the Year, with a 5 million dollar career to date, in addition to multiple sapphire and super sapphire citations. Gisela also earned the Marketing Lifetime Achievement Award for nine years of outstanding

marketing leadership, at MVC.

The top-honor, the Super Sapphire Award for Marketing went to Claudia Simmons who was also recognized as the record breaker in packages sold, and the Channel Top Performer for Encore. Claudia's outstanding fifteen year career with MVC earned her the Marketing Lifetime Achievement award.

The third Marketing Lifetime Achievement Award for 2014, went to Sapphire Award winner Keila Alcantara, for eight years of commitment to the company.

As Trimon and Loefstop concluded their presentation, they also recognized Channel Top Performers Celestino Valdez, Edmond Adonis, Edwin Maduro and Eric Andrews.

The second part of the award ceremony was emceed by Ron Moser and Noanni Cham who recognized top performances in the sales department in the sapphire category, with Nayda Lopez Felici-ana in the top position and Roy Lacle, Nazih Hamawi Francis Groenenveldt, Leon Wardenaar, Sigifredo Castano Cardona, Astrid Tromp Boekhoudt, Cherish Becker, Ivick Rasmijn, Rodney Marugg, Moises Valle-



jo and Victor Guerreo, completing the list of top twelve.

Super Sapphire award winner Charmaine York also won Sales Executive of the Year, 2014, and was joined for a photo opportunity by her colleague, Sidney Flanegin also a Super Sapphire Award winner.

Ruben Pietersz became Sales Team Leader of the Year while Frank Kelly and Douglas Rey were recognized as Rookies of the

Year, 2014, Frank in the sales department and Douglas in marketing.

The last four awards for the evening included Roland Navas, singled out as Front Desk Star, Cherish Becker, lauded for Top Customer Satisfaction Scores, Roy "Joey" Lacle, patted on his back for top sales Encore performance and Miriam Maduro, Manager of the Year 2014.

Pictured here, award ceremony highlights! □





At Ling & Sons Super Center: Aruba's First Official Guinness World Record Attempt

EAGLE - Last Saturday, an official world record attempt took place in Aruba, under auspices of the international record authority Guinness World Records. Ling & Sons Super Center, Fresh FM and Cool FM had joined forces in organizing this challenge: most powdered doughnuts eaten in three minutes.

The current world record is held by Australian Shamus Petherick, who achieved world honor by consuming six doughnuts within the time limit. This record was set four years ago in Queensland, Australia.

Rico Rijk, from Fresh FM stated: "When looking at the world record, you immediately thing it's easy to beat. But it is harder as it seems. We ran into this record on the internet while preparing for our radio shows. And, knowing for years that Ling & Sons is the home for not only the most delicious doughnuts on the island, but also for its Dutch "oliebollen", the association was quickly made."

What is a 'World' Record? All Guinness World Records attempts must fulfill some key criteria including: **MEASURABLE** - Is it the fastest / longest / heaviest / most?

BREAKABLE - Can the record be broken or repeated by someone else? All our record titles must be open to being challenged. **STANDARDIZABLE** - Can the record title be done universally? For example, it cannot be related to something restricted to a region.



VERIFIABLE - Can the claim be proven? For example, a claim such as 'the man

who never drank water' can never be verified unless the man spent his

whole life from birth under surveillance by a witness.

ONE VARIABLE - We can



verify the largest painting but would not consider the largest painting by the most people.

ABSOLUTE RECORDS NOT CATEGORIES - For example, fastest 100m sprint but not the fastest 100m sprint by a Fireman.

UNIVERSAL - The proposal must be something, or about something that is known to the world's majority. It cannot be too specific / regional.

ASA GOOD RULE OF THUMB - if you can't measure / weigh / count it - then it's probably not a record!

Over the last few weeks both Cool FM and Fresh FM have been calling for participants to break the world record, which has never been done before in Aruba. The contestants faced a serious challenge. Even though the record of six doughnuts in three minutes seems beatable, the terms raised the bar. For example, each donut needed to be swallowed before the other could be consumed, no drinking is allowed during the attempt and no licking lips either. The entire attempt was monitored by official referees and it was recorded for video proof.

Amongst the many participants of all ages Mr. Rodrigo Espejo from Aruba ended up eating six complete doughnuts! He almost broke the Guinness World Record. Good job Mr. Espejo!

Aruba does not give up easy, next year this attempt will take place again. □



At the Aruba Ritz-Carlton Hotel; Hanukkah Celebrations Begin with Official Lighting of the Menorah

PALM BEACH – Jews are celebrating the eight-day festival of Hanukkah with traditions that commemorate ancient miracles and symbolize triumph over oppression. The holiday began after sundown this week Tuesday with families gathering to light the first nightly candle of ceremonial lamps and to exchange gifts. The official lighting of the Menorah on Aruba was celebrated Tuesday night in the luxurious lobby of the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. The ceremony was led by Rabbi Ahron Blasberg, residing on the island, and the first candle was officially lit at



6:30pm by Mr. Sam Bradin, who himself is a Holocaust survivor. Many families, both local and visitors from abroad, attended this beautiful cer-

emony, sang along and took the time to be together for this special celebration. Hanukkah, also known as the festival of lights, commemorates the Jewish



uprising in the second century B.C. against the Greek-Syrian kingdom — which tried to force its culture on Jews and desecrated the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. The holiday lasts eight days because, according to tradition, when the Jews rededicated the Temple

in Jerusalem, one vial of oil, enough for one day, burned for eight. Oily foods like fried potato pancakes or doughnuts are eaten in commemoration. In Israel, some display the lamps in special windproof glass boxes outside. □





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ORANJESTAD - Recently, the Aruba Tourism Authority had the great pleasure of honoring Mr. & Mrs. La-porte as Distinguished Visitors of Aruba, and Hal Van

Norman and Elvira Torres as Goodwill Ambassadors of Aruba! The symbolic honorary title is presented in the name of the Minister of Tourism as

a token of appreciation to guests who visit Aruba for 10-to-19 and 20-or-more consecutive years. The certificate was presented by Darline S. de Cuba



representing Aruba Tourism Authority together with Tino Daal, Concierge of Renaissance Hotel. Top reason for returning

provided by the honorees was the Fantastic Sunset, Beautiful Blue Ocean, Friendly Aruban Hospitality and Local Restaurants. □



For MLB, changes in Cuba will take time to sort out

RONALD BLUM
AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Fred Claire can see the day when Major League Baseball teams open academies for prospects in Cuba. "It's absolutely a natural, just as the Dominican was and Venezuela. You go to where the talent is," the former Los Angeles Dodgers general manager said Wednesday. "The high talent level for Cuban players is still there."

That talent has faced obstacles getting to the U.S. since 1961, when the United States terminated diplomatic relations with Cuba. President Barack Obama said Wednesday that the two nations were re-establishing relations.

The path to the major leagues for Cuban players has often involved smugglers who bring them out of the island nation for a price. It's hard to foresee exactly how that will change in the short-term, or whether MLB teams will be allowed to invest resources in the communist country.

"While there are not sufficient details to make a realistic evaluation, we will continue to track this significant issue, and we will keep our clubs informed if this different direction may impact the manner in which they conduct business on issues related to Cuba," MLB said in a statement.

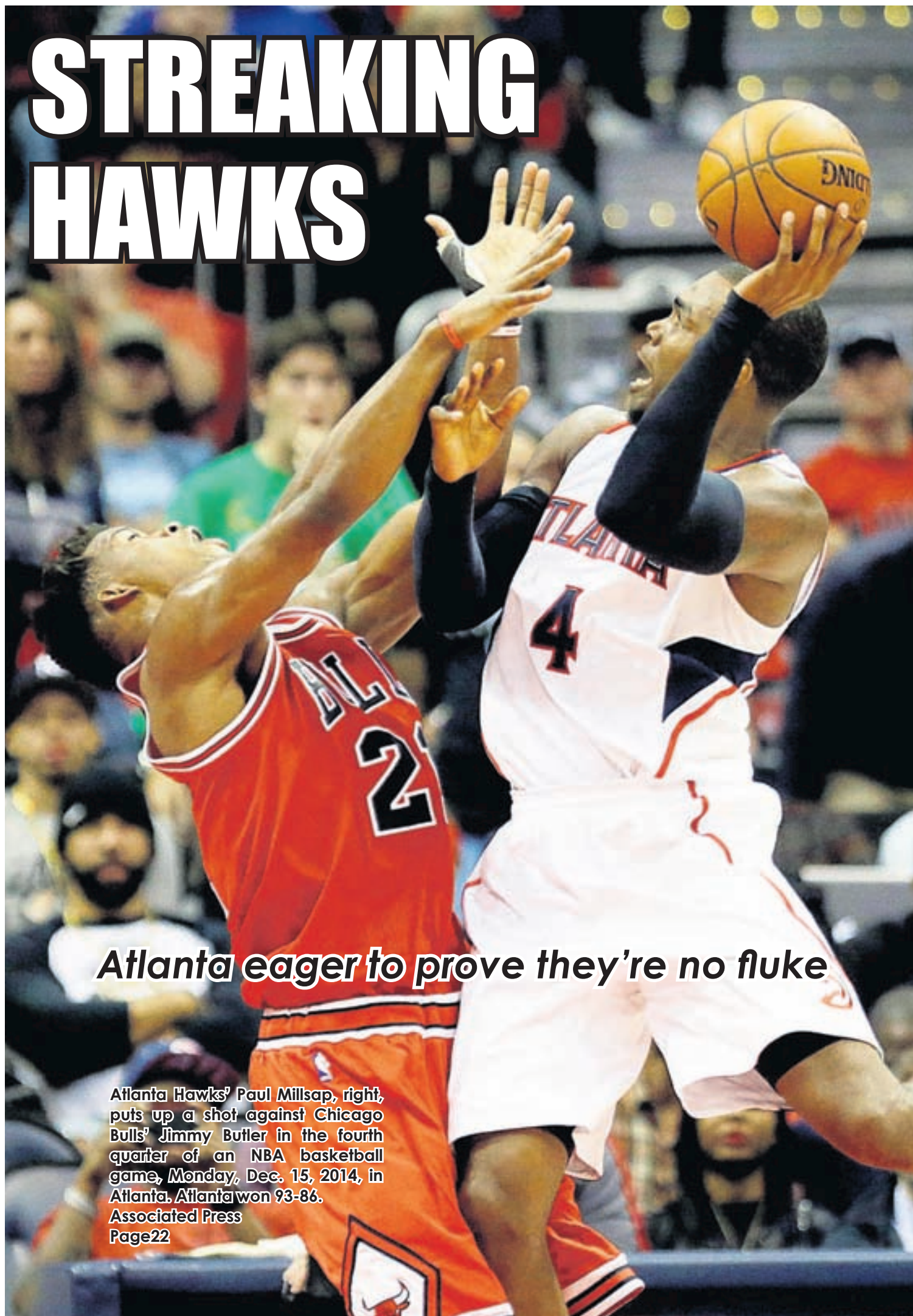
Twenty-five Cuban-born players appeared in the major leagues this year, a group that includes outfielders Yasiel Puig and Yoenys Cespedes, and hard-throwing reliever Aroldis Chapman.

Continued on page 20

STREAKING HAWKS

Atlanta eager to prove they're no fluke

Atlanta Hawks' Paul Millsap, right, puts up a shot against Chicago Bulls' Jimmy Butler in the fourth quarter of an NBA basketball game, Monday, Dec. 15, 2014, in Atlanta. Atlanta won 93-86.
Associated Press
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NHL Capsules

Panthers outlast Capitals in longest NHL shootout

The Associated Press

SUNRISE, Florida (AP) —

Nick Bjugstad scored the winning goal in the longest shootout in NHL history to lift the Florida Panthers over the Washington Capitals 2-1 on Tuesday night. Bjugstad's goal came in the 20th round — on the 40th shot of the shootout — and beat Braden Holtby on the right side. The previous NHL record was 15 rounds, when the New York Rangers beat Washington on Nov. 26, 2005.

The Panthers outscored the Capitals 6-5 in the tiebreaker; and the six goals were the most in a shootout. Jussi Jokinen, Dave Bolland, Derek MacKenzie, Sean Bergenheim and Dylan Olsen were also successful for Florida.

The Panthers were down to their last shot five times and answered each time. Alex Ovechkin, Brooks Laich, Joel Ward, John Carlson and Brooks Orpik had shootout goals for the Capitals.

Derek MacKenzie scored in regulation for Florida, and Roberto Luongo



Florida Panthers center Nick Bjugstad (27) celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal in a shootout of an NHL hockey game against the Washington Capitals, in Sunrise, Fla., Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2014. Bjugstad's goal came in the 20th round — on the 40th shot of the shootout, the longest shootout in NHL history. The Panthers won 2-1.

Associated Press

made 23 saves.

Troy Brouwer scored for Washington, and Holtby stopped 28 shots.

LIGHTNING 3, FLYERS 1

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Steven Stamkos and Tyler Johnson scored second-period goals to lead Tam-

pa Bay over Philadelphia.

Valtteri Filppula added an empty-net goal, and Ryan Callahan had a pair of assists for the Lightning (20-10-3), who won for the second time in six games.

Andrei Vasilevskiy, the No. 19 pick in the 2012 draft,

made 23 saves to win his NHL debut.

Wayne Simmonds scored for Philadelphia (11-14-5), which was 3-0-2 in its previous five games but lost its sixth straight to Tampa Bay. The Flyers are 3-12-1 against the Lightning since the 2010-11 season.

Simmonds has six goals in six games. Steve Mason made 20 saves for Philadelphia.

Vasilevskiy started in place of Ben Bishop, who left Monday's loss at Pittsburgh with a lower-body injury.

CANADIENS 4, HURRICANES 1

MONTREAL (AP) — Alex Galchenyuk scored a career-best three goals, and Montreal beat Carolina for its third straight win.

Brandon Prust added a goal, and Carey Price stopped 25 shots for the Canadiens (20-10-2).

Victor Rask was the only goal scorer for Carolina (8-19-3), which has lost six in a row. Cam Ward made 25 saves. The Hurricanes have scored just one goal in each of the losses in their skid.

After losing three straight on the road, the Canadiens have won three consecutive on their home-

BLUE JACKETS 1, RED WINGS 0, SO

DETROIT (AP) — Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 30 shots through overtime and two more in a shootout as Columbus outlasted Detroit for its seventh straight win.

Boone Jenner and Ryan Johansen both scored in the tiebreaker for Columbus against Jimmy Howard, who made 29 saves. Detroit has lost four straight. Columbus has three shoot-

out wins during its streak. Pavel Datsyuk had the lone shootout goal for Detroit, which has dropped three consecutive home games in shootouts.

PREDATORS 3, BRUINS 2, SO

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — Derek Roy scored the only goal of the shootout to give Nashville a win over Boston.

Mike Fisher and Mike Ribeiro had goals in regulation for Nashville, which has won three of four. Milan Lucic and Reilly Smith scored for Boston. The Bruins have lost three in a row and six of seven.

In the tiebreaker, Roy beat Tuukka Rask with a backhand after nearly losing the puck on his rush.

Pekka Rinne made 33 saves in regulation and overtime and denied all three attempts in the shootout.

MAPLE LEAFS 6, DUCKS 2

TORONTO (AP) — Phil Kessel scored two of Toronto's four third-period goals and the Maple Leafs beat Anaheim for their sixth straight victory, snapping the Ducks' eight-game winning streak.

David Booth scored his first of the season unassisted at 4:37 of the third before Nazem Kadri got his ninth at 5:28 to put Toronto ahead 4-1. Anaheim starter Frederik Andersen was replaced by Ilya Bryzgalov following Kadri's goal.

Jonathan Bernier stopped 40 shots and was instrumental as Toronto handed the Ducks their first loss in eight games this month. Anaheim outshot the Maple Leafs 42-27.

Brain-injury program working with NFL players

LANSING, Michigan (AP)

— A brain-injury treatment program originally designed for military veterans injured on the battlefield has been updated to include professional athletes. Representatives with the Eisenhower Center say it is the only facility in the country that pairs NFL former players with military veterans as they undergo treatment for a number of health related issues.

The residential neuro-rehabilitation facility is based in Ann Arbor.

The program provides intense treatment for soldiers and athletes recovering from concussions, mild traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems.

It evolved from the Eisenhower Center's transitional treatment program to help military members deal with brain injuries.

The NFL expects 6,000 of nearly 20,000 retired players — or 28 percent — to suffer from Alzheimer's disease or at least moderate dementia someday. Former players have sued.

Current Detroit Lions tight end Joseph Fauria and former quarterback Eric Hipple attended Tuesday's announcement.

"Nearly one-third of all retired NFL players will suffer from a long-term cognitive problem," Hipple said. "The players and veterans who have gone through the After the Impact program have learned a lot from

each other and helped each other on the path to recovery."

The NFL last month urged a judge to approve an estimated \$1 billion settlement of concussion lawsuits despite concerns raised by former players or survivors who felt left out. The 65-year fund would resolve thousands of lawsuits that accuse the NFL of long hiding what it knew about concussions and brain injuries to keep players on the field.

The issue is a significant one in hockey too. In October, a consolidated class-action lawsuit by former NHL players against the league over concussion-related injuries was filed in federal court.

Yankees: A-Rod now a full-time designated hitter

RONALD BLUM

AP Sports Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Alex Rodriguez faces a diminished role in his return to the New York Yankees, who have stripped him of his third-base job and plan to limit his role to full-time designated hitter, at most.

A-Rod's days as an everyday fielder are over, general manager Brian Cashman said on Tuesday, and Chase Headley will start at third after agreeing this week to a \$52 million, four-year contract.

Coming off a season-long suspension for violations of Major League Baseball's drug agreement and labor contract, Rodriguez will have to compete with Martin Prado for time as Headley's backup at third. "I can't expect Alex to be anything," Cashman said during a telephone interview with The Associated Press. "I've got to think the worst and hope

for the best. Even before the suspension, he wasn't the same player at third base on the defensive or offensive side. And that was before the suspension. "And now he's been out of the game for a year. He's approaching 40 years of age. And just to automatically assume, given his circumstances, that he'll be able to plug right in, play third as an everyday guy and hold up and be productive, that would be dangerous thinking from my perspective."

Rodriguez turns 40 in July and has not played a full season since 2007 because of leg injuries, operations on both hips, and the suspension. Cashman said A-Rod will have to prove to manager Joe Girardi he can play the field.

Cashman said he has not spoken with Rodriguez about his new role.

"I don't need to. I've

been very consistent with my conversations publicly from October on," he said. "I have not heard from Alex on any of that, and I know he reads all this stuff."

Rodriguez is owed \$61 million by the Yankees in the final three seasons of his contract, and New York could use improvement at DH—its players there combined to hit .230 this year (12th in the American League) with 18 homers (11th), 63 RBIs (13th), a .290 on-base percentage (14th) and a .372 slugging percentage (12th), according to STATS. New York anticipates



In this Feb. 17, 2009, file photo, New York Yankees' Alex Rodriguez reads a statement to the media alongside Yankees general manager Brian Cashman after arriving at George Steinbrenner Field in Tampa, Fla.

Associated Press

Headley, a 2012 Gold Glove winner, will be joined in the infield most days by Didi Gregorius at shortstop, Prado at second, and Mark Teixeira at first.

"We believe we now have a very strong defensive infield," Cashman said, "that will serve our pitching staff and our run prevention well."



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MLB

Continued from page 17

There have been 59 since 1995, according to STATS. Many have received large contracts, topped by a \$72.5 million, seven-year agreement in August between outfielder Rusney Castillo and the Boston Red Sox. Chicago White Sox first baseman Jose Abreu was voted AL Rookie of the Year this season after agreeing to a \$68 million, six-year deal with the Chicago White Sox. Yasmany Tomas, an outfielder who may be shifted to third base, signed \$68.5 million, six-year contract with the Arizona Diamondbacks this month.

Because of the American trade embargo, a player who defects from Cuba has to obtain a license from the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control to "unblock" him before he can sign with a major league organization. It would take



In this Sept. 19, 2014, file photo, Los Angeles Dodgers' Yasiel Puig doubles off a pitch from Chicago Cubs relief pitcher Eric Jokisch, during the fourth inning of a baseball game in Chicago. Associated Press

congressional action to lift the embargo.

"We remain hopeful that today's announcement will lead to further positive developments," the Major

League Baseball Players Association said in a statement.

The Cuban government has approved a policy allowing athletes to sign in

foreign leagues and pay tax on their earnings, but the U.S. embargo prevents American teams from employing Cuban residents. Well regarded outfielder Alfredo Despaigne agreed this year to a contract with the Chiba Lotte Marines of Japan's Pacific League.

Defecting players have established residency outside the U.S. in order to become free agents and not be subject to MLB's amateur draft. But free-agent riches could come to an end in 2017, when MLB teams hope to start an international draft.

Under MLB's collective bargaining agreement with the players' association that runs until December 2016, Cubans and others who reside outside the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico are included in each MLB team's international signing pool unless they are 23 or older and have played as a professional in a professional league for at least five seasons.

Teams are penalized for exceeding their signing bonus pools. The New York Yankees, Boston and Tampa Bay have forfeited their rights to give any international player a bonus over \$300,000 in the next two signing years, which start each July 2.

MLB and the union instituted similar signing pools in 2012 for players covered by the amateur draft each June. But Cuban defectors remain exempt from those limits for now.

"Frankly, American players, many of them have a lesser standard than what's offered international players," said agent Scott Boras, who has criticized restraints on contracts for players in American high schools and colleges.

"We've really got to review what we're doing with our draft and our international players to really say what we do with the Cubans. Maybe it will prompt a broader discussion to revamp the entirety of the system."

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NBA Capsules

Grizzlies snap Warriors winning streak at 16

The Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tennessee (AP)

— Marc Gasol scored 24 points, and the Memphis Grizzlies snapped the Golden State Warriors' NBA-best 16-game winning streak with a 105-98 victory on Tuesday night.

Mike Conley and Zach Randolph each scored 17 points, and Randolph also had 10 rebounds as Memphis earned its fifth straight win. Vince Carter added a season-high 16 points, and Jon Leuer had 11.

The Warriors came in with the NBA's best record at 21-2. They lost for the first time since Nov. 11 against the Spurs, also the last team to beat Memphis. This was the first time in NBA history in which both teams had 19 or more wins in the first 24 games.

Golden State star Stephen Curry missed back-to-back 3-pointers in the final 10 seconds. He had 19 points on 9-of-25 shooting, including a 1-for-10 night from beyond the arc.

Klay Thompson scored 22 points for the Warriors, and Marreese Speights had 18.

PELICANS 119, JAZZ 111

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Anthony Davis returned from a chest injury and scored 31 points, helping New Orleans rally for the win.

Davis, who missed most of Friday night's victory over Cleveland and all of Sunday night's loss to Golden State, played with a protective vest that did not appear to inhibit him. He had nine rebounds and three blocks, with all three rejections coming in the pivotal final four minutes.

Ryan Anderson hit six 3-pointers and finished with 28 points for New Orleans, while Tyreke Evans added 19 points, scoring nine during New Orleans' 41-point fourth quarter.

Enes Kanter scored 29 points for Utah, which has lost three straight and 12 of 13.

THUNDER 104, KINGS 92

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP)

— Russell Westbrook had 32 points and seven assists, Kevin Durant scored 26 and

Oklahoma City beat the reeling Sacramento Kings for its seventh straight win.

The Kings played their first game since Michael Malone was fired as coach and lead assistant Tyrone Corbin was promoted to interim coach. They trailed 9-0 after 2 1/2 minutes and dropped to 2-8 while franchise centerpiece DeMarcus Cousins recovers from viral meningitis.

The Thunder went ahead by 16 in the first quarter, led by just seven at halftime and pulled away again in the closing minutes behind their star duo. Oklahoma City improved to 7-1 since Durant returned from a broken right foot.

Rudy Gay scored 22 points, and reserve Carl Landry added 14 for the Kings.

MAVERICKS 107, KNICKS 87
NEW YORK (AP) — Tyson Chandler had three dunks during Dallas' sizzling start to his return to New York, and Dirk Nowitzki scored 16 points for the Mavericks.

Chandler played a key role in the NBA's highest-scoring team putting together a nearly unstoppable start that gave it the lead for good. Monta Ellis added 14 points, and Chandler Parsons had 13 after missing a game with a sore lower back.

Carmelo Anthony scored 26 points for the Knicks. Tim Hardaway Jr. had 14 but was 5 for 17 in another poor shooting effort.

Shortly after hearing mostly cheers during introductions, Chandler dunked a lob pass for the game's opening basket. He threw down another alley-oop that gave Dallas 10 baskets in its first 11 shots.

HEAT 95, NETS 91

NEW YORK (AP) — Dwyane Wade scored 28 points, leading Miami to the road win.

The Heat had five players score in double figures, including three reserves. Starting forward Luol Deng had 18 points, and rookie Shabazz Napier scored 11. The game was delayed for 29 minutes in the first quarter when the installation of

a new green roof at Barclays Center led to a water leak.

Mason Plumlee had 21 points and nine rebounds for Brooklyn, and Joe Johnson scored 16 points. Deron Williams added 15 points and 11 assists.

WIZARDS 109, TIMBERWOLVES 95

WASHINGTON (AP) — John Wall scored 21 points and equaled a career high with 17 assists, helping Washington to its fifth consecutive win.

Washington scored 14 straight to take a 14-2 lead less than 4 1/2 minutes into the game. Wall had 10 points and six assists in the first quarter.

Rasual Butler had 23 points for the Wizards.

Thaddeus Young, who led a third-quarter charge, had a season-high 29 points for Minnesota, which has lost nine of 10. Shabazz Muhammad scored 21.



Memphis Grizzlies center Marc Gasol (33) shoots between Golden State Warriors forward Marreese Speights (5) and guard Klay Thompson (11) in the second half of an NBA basketball game Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2014, in Memphis, Tenn.

Associated Press

A season only seems long when it never ends

DOUG FERGUSON
AP Golf Writer

The idea that the PGA Tour calendar is too full depends on how you look at the calendar.

In this new world of the wraparound season, it seems as though golf never ends. There was a three-week break between the end of one season (Tour Championship) and the start of another (Frys.com Open). And then the PGA Tour takes a seven-week break before resuming the new season in Kapalua.

But is that much different from 10 years ago?

The PGA Tour had 44 consecutive weeks of golf in 2004 from Jan. 8 at Kapalua until Nov. 7 at the Tour Championship. That schedule included three tournaments held the same week as World Golf Championships, the B.C. Open opposite the British Open and the Texas Open the same week as the Ry-

der Cup.

The tour had 43 weeks of golf in 2014, with the three-week break built around the Ryder Cup in the early fall and the final tournament Nov. 16 in Mexico. And there were only three opposite-field events the same week as three WGCs (Doral, Firestone, Shanghai).

Is the new "fall start" any different from the old "fall finish?" Now it starts in California and goes to Las Vegas, Sea Island, two in Asia, one in Mississippi and Mexico. Ten years ago, the lineup after the majors included Hartford, Canada, Tampa and now-defunct tournaments at Disney and 84 Lumber. There also was a WGC thrown in the mix. Go back even further. Twenty years ago, the PGA Tour schedule featured 43 consecutive weeks of tournaments.

That was right about the time the WGCs were being



Danny Willett of England, left, poses with his wife Nicole, right, with the trophy after winning the Nedbank Golf Challenge, at the Gary Player Country Club in Sun City, South Africa, Sunday Dec. 7, 2014.

Associated Press

discussed, and a decade before the FedEx Cup was even an idea.

The biggest change might be the golf that isn't being played.

Either way, there was never a shortage of golf. That much hasn't changed.

Hawks eager to show strong start is no fluke

PAUL NEWBERRY
AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — The Atlanta Hawks know it's going to take more than a couple of strong months to prove this NBA franchise has really turned things around after so many dashed hopes. The next week or so could be very telling.

After a tumultuous summer, the Hawks are off to a promising start with a roster that's short on megastars but deep in versatility. Already, they've strung together a nine-game winning streak — the team's longest in 17 years — and pushed themselves near to the top of the Eastern Conference.

"Are we surprised?" forward Paul Millsap said, repeating a frequently asked question. "No. We felt like we had a pretty good team last year, but we weren't healthy the whole year. We felt like if we were healthy, we could really do something special."

Not surprisingly, there are still doubts about whether a team that went 38-44 last season, fortuitously sneaking into the playoffs, is really as good as its 17-7 record. Only two of those victories have been against teams



Atlanta Hawks' Al Horford, center, puts up a shot against Chicago Bulls' Nikola Mirotic, right, of Serbia, in the second quarter of an NBA basketball game, Monday, Dec. 15, 2014, in Atlanta. Atlanta won 93-86.

Associated Press

with a winning record, the latest coming late Monday when the Hawks knocked off Chicago 93-86.

Over the next week, the Hawks will face Cleveland, Houston and Dallas on the road, before returning home to face the Los Angeles Clippers. The

combined record of those teams going into Wednesday's play was 67-29.

"We didn't play the high-talent, high-win teams yet," said 35-year-old Elton Brand, the senior member of the Hawks. "So this week's the barometer." With second-year coach

Mike Budenholzer installing a system that's been described as San Antonio East, the Hawks do a lot of things right. Start with the ball movement that he demands from the offense, which has resulted in at least 20 assists in all but two of Atlanta's games. Even more impressive, the Hawks lead the league with 67.4 percent of their baskets set up by an assist.

The Hawks haven't had a truly major star since Dominique Wilkins 20 years ago, but they've received significant minutes from a dozen players. Budenholzer generally uses a 10-man rotation, which allows Atlanta to spread the scoring wealth.

Jeff Teague (16.8) is the team leader, with an average that would be pacing only seven other teams. All five Atlanta starters are averaging at least 11.4 per game.

The Hawks have long been a team that draws little notice around the NBA — never good enough to get past the second round of the playoffs, rarely bad enough to land an elite player in the draft. Atlanta has traditionally ranked near the bottom of the league in attendance, and even when they draw a sellout crowd it's often because of a visiting star such as LeBron James or Kobe Bryant.

The team did make headlines during the last offseason, but for all the wrong reasons. Owner Bruce Levenson was forced to sell his share of the team after

emails came to light showing him complaining about having too many African-American fans. Not long after, general manager Danny Ferry went on an indefinite leave of absence when it was revealed that he, too, had made racially charged comments when discussing a possible free-agent signee.

There's been no word on a new owner, or whether Ferry will ever return to his job. In the meantime, Budenholzer is handling both the coaching and personnel decisions.

If the unusual arrangement is a distraction, it hasn't shown on the court.

The return of center Al Horford, who missed most of last season with a torn pectoral muscle, has been a huge boost. Millsap, an All-Star a year ago, is having another solid season. Teague continues to develop into one of the league's better point guards. Kyle Korver stretches the court with his 3-point range, while DeMarre Carroll is capable of stepping up when needed.

It remains to be seen if the Hawks have the sort of go-to scorer every team needs in the playoffs. That weakness showed up last year, when they squandered a chance to knock off top-seeded Indiana in the opening round.

"There are still times," Korver said, "when you've got to get the ball to someone and say, 'Make a play for us.' That absolutely happens, especially in the playoffs." □

Matsui to team up with Jeter for baseball charity in Japan

JIM ARMSTRONG
AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Hideki Matsui will team up with former New York Yankees teammate Derek Jeter to hold a baseball charity event in support of children affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

Matsui, the 2009 World Series MVP, attended a press conference in Tokyo on Wednesday to promote the event on March 21 at Tokyo Dome.

"(Derek) will make an enormous contribution to this event," Matsui said. "He is a tremendous human being and was a great teammate and I'm sure the kids will be thrilled to see someone of his stature."



Former New York Yankees outfielder and 2009 World Series MVP Hideki Matsui holds up a promotional t-shirt with his number 55 during a press conference at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan in Tokyo, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014.

Associated Press

The event will include over 600 participants, including a group of baseball play-

ers from the Tohoku region that was devastated by the March 11, 2011, disaster that killed 16,000 people.

Profits will be used to help children from the region. The event will include a baseball clinic and a home run derby between Matsui and Jeter, who retired in 2014 after a 20-year career with the Yankees.

Matsui would not be drawn on speculation connecting him with a coaching job either with the Yankees or his former team in Japan the Yomiuri Giants.

"That isn't related to this event so I'll leave that for another time," Matsui said when asked about becoming a coach. □

Track coach Jon Drummond gets 8-year doping ban

EDDIE PELLIS
AP National Writer

DENVER (AP) — Track coach Jon Drummond has received an eight-year doping ban after arbitrators found he possessed, trafficked, administered and assisted in the use and cover-up of banned substances. The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency announced the ban Wednesday against the man who was a per-

sonal coach for American 100-meter record-holder Tyson Gay and also served as relay coach for the U.S. track team at the London Olympics.

Gay was given a one-year suspension last year for testing positive for banned substances — a penalty that was reduced because he provided information that led to USADA's case against Drummond. □

BlackBerry launches Classic in last-ditch effort

BARBARA ORTUTAY
ROB GILLIES

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — BlackBerry is returning to its roots with a new phone that features a traditional keyboard at a time when rival Apple and Android phones — and most smartphone customers — have embraced touch screens. With the Classic, BlackBerry is courting its core customer, the business user. The physical keyboard is something traditional BlackBerry users prefer because they find it easier than touch screens to type with. The company is also emphasizing battery life and security. “A lot of people say the Classic is aiming for loyal customers. And that is true,” CEO John Chen said at the gadget’s launch event, tellingly held in New York City’s Financial District. But he also invited people who haven’t used a BlackBerry “especially people who are young,” to try the BlackBerry Classic.

Pioneered in 1999 with the launch of the RIM 950, BlackBerry changed the culture by allowing on-the-go business people to access email wirelessly. Then came a new generation of competing smartphones, and suddenly the BlackBerry looked ancient.

Apple showed that phones can handle much more than email and phone calls. BlackBerry was late in overhauling its operating system to compete.

BlackBerry now holds a small fraction of the U.S. smartphone market after commanding a nearly 50 percent share as recently as 2009.

The company is trying to stay relevant on making hardware even as it tries to transform into an enterprise security and consumer software company. Whether the Classic will sell enough to keep it in the hardware business is unclear.

“It’s going to be a niche product based around enterprise, based around se-



BlackBerry’s director of marketing and enterprise Jeff Gadway demonstrates the company’s new phone the BlackBerry Classic, during a news conference, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, in New York.

Associated Press

curity and pockets of the world where there is still strengths.

The future of this company is not the hardware,” BGC analyst Colin Gillis said.

The BlackBerry Classic is available for sale starting Wednesday for \$449 in the U.S. through Amazon.com and BlackBerry.com. It will come later to AT&T and

Verizon.

BlackBerry has been expanding its efforts to sell mobile-security software on its rivals’ smartphones and tablets to help counter the waning popularity of its own devices.

And on the hardware side, BlackBerry partnered with Foxconn, the Taiwanese company that assembles products in vast factories in China. Foxconn, known for its manufacturing contract work on Apple’s iPhones and iPads, jointly designs and manufactures most BlackBerry devices and manages inventory of the devices in an agreement that offloads much of BlackBerry’s manufacturing costs. Foxconn is making the Classic for BlackBerry.

Chen, who took over as chief executive 13 months ago, has set a goal of selling 10 million phones a year. In comparison, Apple sold 39.3 million iPhones over three months in the third quarter. □

Dish adds Netflix app to some of its set-top boxes

NEW YORK (AP) — The satellite TV company Dish is making it easier to watch video from an online rival, Netflix.

Dish said Wednesday that it is adding the Netflix app for U.S. customers who have its latest set-top boxes, its second-generation Hopper devices released in February 2013. Dish wouldn’t say how many customers have that box.

Customers with older boxes would need a replacement to use the feature. Dish customers also must subscribe to Netflix’s \$9-a-month service on their own.

TiVo also makes a device that combines regular TV channels with online video services, but Netflix said Dish is the first U.S. pay TV provider to add the app to its own set-top box. Netflix has similar deals with cable companies overseas.

The development comes as pay TV providers such as Dish face challenges keeping customers as they



In this Nov. 10, 2008 file photo, Dish Network satellite dishes are attached to a home in Buffalo, N.Y.

Associated Press

increasingly view video online — such as through Netflix. It might seem odd that Dish would embrace a

competitor. But the move could keep consumers using Dish’s set-top box instead of switching to a

stand-alone streaming device such as Roku or Apple TV to watch Netflix. Dish plans to make watching

Netflix even more seamless in the future, by adding its TV and movie titles to its search function. □



Visitors take photos of themselves with the "Charging Bull" sculpture in Wall Street's financial district, Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014, in New York. This week marks the 25th anniversary of the installation of Arturo Di Modica's 1989 work, which started out as an unauthorized installation. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

Wall Street surges on Fed, oil

STEVE ROTHWELL
AP Markets Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market had its best day in more than a year after the Federal Reserve said it would remain "patient" in its approach to raising interest rates.

Stocks rose from the open on Wednesday, led by energy companies, as oil prices showed signs of stabilizing from a big slump. The market's gains were extended after Fed policymakers released a statement following the end of a two-day meeting.

A near six-year bull run for the U.S. stock market has been helped by the Fed's huge stimulus, which has pushed down borrowing costs. At the start of the month investors worried that signs of a strengthening economy would lead policymakers to bring forward the start of rate increases. But on Wednesday, the central bank said it foresaw no rate hike in the first three months of 2015.

"The Fed is going to be our friend for a very long time," said Burt White, chief investment officer for LPL Financial. "Growth continues to be good and corporate America is healthy. If you mix all that together it translates to rising stock prices."

The Standard & Poor's 500

index rose 40.15 points, or 2.04 percent, to 2,012.89. That was the biggest gain for the index since October 2013.

The Dow Jones industrial average gained 288 points, or 1.7 percent, to 17,356.87. The Nasdaq composite climbed 96.48 points, or 2.1 percent, to 4,644.31.

Stock investors have had a wild ride in the final quarter of the year. The market plunged at the start of October on concerns that global growth was slowing. Then it rebounded and surged to record levels at the start of December, before falling sharply last week as the price of oil collapsed, dragging down energy stocks.

Despite the heightened volatility, long-term investors should stick to their long-term goals, rather than jump in and out of stocks and sectors, said Jeff Lancaster, a principal of San Francisco-based Bingham, Osborn & Scarborough.

"I don't see anything that looks so tempting, or so perilous, that you should lurch to the left or the right," Lancaster said.

On Wednesday, energy stocks led gains for the S&P 500 index as the price of oil steadied. Stocks in the sector jumped 4.2 percent, cutting their losses for the year to 13 percent. The

sector was down as much as 17 percent in the year-to-date as of Monday.

The price of U.S. oil rose Wednesday after the U.S. Energy Department reported a decline in inventories, a reversal of an earlier report of increased inventories from an industry group. Benchmark U.S. crude rose 54 cents to close at \$56.47 a barrel. Brent crude for February delivery, a benchmark for international oils used by many U.S. refineries, rose \$1.17 to close at \$61.18 a barrel. The January Brent contract expired Tuesday at \$59.86.

Stocks that were linked to Cuba surged after President Barack Obama announced the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the country on Wednesday. He declared an end to America's "outdated approach" to the communist island in a historic shift aimed at ending a half-century of Cold War enmity.

Copa Airlines, a Panama City-based carrier, and one of the most successful airlines in Latin America, jumped. Its stock rose \$6.36, or 7.2 percent, to \$94.48 on the news.

The Herzfeld Caribbean Basin Fund, a closed-end fund designed to take advantage of greater trade with Cuba, surged \$1.97, or 28.9 percent, to \$8.78. □

Investors fearing now-shaky debt from emerging markets

LANDON THOMAS Jr
© 2014 New York Times

They were the darlings of global investors.

Petrobras in Brazil. Pemex in Mexico. Gazprom in Russia. The biggest energy companies in some of the biggest emerging markets sold billions of dollars of bonds to investors eager to capitalize on the high interest rates.

As the price of oil plummets and local currencies plunge in value, those bonds are looking shaky.

And concerns are now mounting that their troubles will unleash a new wave of market contagion as big funds unload their stocks, bonds and all manner of investments in these countries.

The precipitous fall in the Russian ruble - and the collapse of the country's bond and stock markets - has already rattled investors, sparking a sell-off in Mexico and Brazil. Like Russia, these countries also relied on cheap money to bankroll their energy investments and fund their growth. Economists have warned of broader economic ripples if large, state-run companies like Petrobras and Gazprom are cut off from the bond market and lack alternative financing options. Investments will slow, growth will come to a halt,

and currencies will weaken - leading to corporate defaults and further investor unease.

With investors selling Gazprom bonds and other Russian securities, emerging market analysts say that the pressure has already spread to Petrobras, which is enmeshed in a corruption scandal, and to Pemex, where the fear is that the oil price collapse will lead to a serious slowdown in Mexico. The bond yields of all three companies, which move in the opposite direction of their underlying price, have spiked in recent days. The bonds and currencies in non-oil producing countries like Turkey, India and South Africa have also suffered, a sign that investors have broader anxieties about emerging markets. Such countries have been especially dependent on foreign capital flows to fund their growth.

On Tuesday, the Turkish lira hit a record low against the dollar. The Federal Reserve - and its shift away from stimulus - is only adding to the tension. The Fed is expected to increase interest rates as the U.S. economy continues to gain strength. As a result, the dollar is likely to keep gaining value relative to the Brazilian real, the Mexican peso and the Russian ruble. □



A vendor sells snacks out of her car, just outside the gates of a Petrobras facility near Ipojuca, Brazil. Some economists fear that the billions of dollars' worth of bonds Petrobras and other emerging markets oil explorers could be the source of a major economic panic now that the price of oil is plummeting.

(Tomas Munita/The New York Times)

Philips to buy US medical imaging firm Volcano

TOBY STERLING

Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — Royal Philips NV said Wednesday it has agreed to acquire U.S. medical equipment maker Volcano Corp. for \$1.2 billion (around 1 billion euros) in a deal that would beef up its presence in technology which allows doctors to see inside patients' hearts and veins during treatment.

In an agreement backed

by Volcano's management, Philips will offer \$1 billion for Volcano's stock, or \$18 per share — a 57 percent premium to its closing price Tuesday of \$11.49. Philips will also assume \$200 million of debt.

The Amsterdam-based Philips, a major maker of medical imaging equipment, said the deal will allow it to sell its own products to Volcano's customer base, and vice versa. It intends to fold

San Diego-based Volcano into an operating arm devoted to "image-guided therapy" — techniques that allow doctors to see inside patients' bodies.

Philips sells about a third of the X-ray imaging devices for vascular systems that are used in major cardiac surgery hospitals, while Volcano specializes in "smart" catheters that can measure blood flow as it passes through the veins. Philips

Chief Executive Frans van Houten compared Philips' offering to a road map and Volcano's to the view from the drivers' seat, saying they will work together well as a package for cardiologists.

Challenged on the high premium Philips is paying for Volcano, he described the company as "the world market leader in smart catheters" and noted that its shares have fallen

sharply this year as its business suffered a slowdown and it posted losses.

It is a "very justifiable price," he said of the acquisition offer on a conference call. "We needed to act right now."

Philips said the deal will push "image-guided therapy" sales growth for both companies from less than 5 percent to the "high single digits" and add to Philips' earnings starting in 2017.

FedEx misses Street second-quarter forecasts

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) — FedEx's second-quarter earnings jumped 23 percent, but the package delivery company missed Wall Street forecasts and left its expectation for the full fiscal year unchanged.

FedEx said a jump in plane maintenance costs blunted gains the company reaped from managing costs, lowering its pension expense and growing its export package revenue. The company expects the increase in aircraft maintenance costs to subside starting in the fourth fiscal quarter.

Shares of the Memphis, Tennessee, company fell more than 4 percent in pre-market trading about 90 minutes ahead of the market opening.

Overall, FedEx Corp. earned \$616 million, or \$2.14 per share, in its fiscal second quarter. That is up from \$500 million, or \$1.57, in last year's quarter, when FedEx also missed analyst

expectations as customers continued to shift toward cheaper ground-shipping options and away from overnight air.

dEx to earn \$2.22 per share on revenue of \$11.97 billion, according to Zacks Investment Research.

FedEx said it still expects full-

per share for the year.

FedEx and rival UPS are heading into their busiest period of the year and hoping to avoid a repeat

About 2 million packages promised for delivery by Christmas Eve didn't make it. This time, FedEx planned to hire 50,000 seasonal workers and invest in its ground-shipping network to make deliveries on time. But there is always the risk of surprises, like the accident Monday on a New Jersey highway.

On what FedEx expected to be the busiest delivery day of the year, one of its trucks overturned, sending a mountain of packages spilling across a grassy median.

Another truck hauling two trailers crashed Tuesday in Georgia, also sending packages spilling all over the highway.

Shares of FedEx fell 4.4 percent, or \$7.66, to \$166.60 in premarket trading Wednesday. The stock had climbed 21 percent since the beginning of the year through Tuesday's close, more than tripling the gain of the Standard & Poor's 500 index.



Total revenue climbed 5 percent to \$11.94 billion in year earnings of between \$8.50 and \$9 per share. Analysts surveyed by FactSet forecast earnings of \$9.11

Courier Stephen Werts loads packages onto a truck for delivery at a FedEx facility, in Marietta, Ga. FedEx reported quarterly financial results on Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2014.

(AP Photo/David Goldman)

this year's quarter.

But analysts expected Fe-

analysts surveyed by FactSet forecast earnings of \$9.11

last-minute online shopping caught them off-guard.

Napster co-founder to invest in allergy research

OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Napster co-founder Sean Parker missed most of his final year in high school and has ended up in the emergency room countless of times because of his deadly allergy to nuts, shellfish and other foods.

Now that the former Facebook president is the father of two small children who have a genetic basis to develop allergies, he says he

wants to help find a lasting cure to allergies. Parker announced Wednesday that he is donating \$24 million over the next two years to establish an allergy research center at the Stanford University School of Medicine. "We have been applying Band-Aids for decades by using antihistamines to treat symptoms instead of going after the root cause of allergies," Parker said. The Sean N. Parker Center for Allergy

Research will focus on understanding the dysfunctions of the immune system that result in allergic reactions and on finding the safest and best treatments for allergies through laboratory and data research, clinical trials and community outreach. The Silicon Valley entrepreneur said he missed most of his senior year of high school because he was hospitalized with a bronchial infection due to severe allergies and asth-

ma. Parker said his severe allergic reactions have sent him to the hospital 14 times in the last six years.

Parker, 35, said neither his 2-year-old girl nor his 2-week-old boy have allergies but he knows they could develop them.

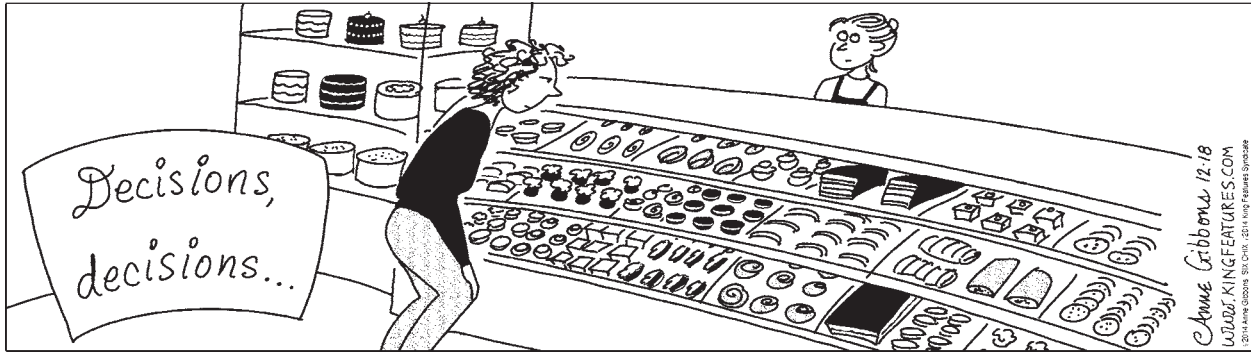
"Now that I'm a father, I'm sympathetic to what my parents went through," he said. "It's terrifying for parents to see their child go through anaphylactic shock because of an al-

lergic reaction." The center will be led by Dr. Kary Nadeau, an immunology researcher who focuses on allergies on children and adults. Nadeau has developed an allergy treatment that involves giving patients micro-doses of the allergen and increasing the amount ingested — over months or years — to build tolerance overtime. "The goal is to be able to achieve desensitization in a couple of weeks," Parker said.

Mutts



6 Chix



Blondie



Mother Goose & Grimm



Baby Blues



Zits



Conceptis Sudoku

	6		2		1		8	
5								9
				7				
9			5		8			2
		2				6		
7			9		6			8
				5				
2								7
	7		6		3		1	

Difficulty Level ★★

12/18

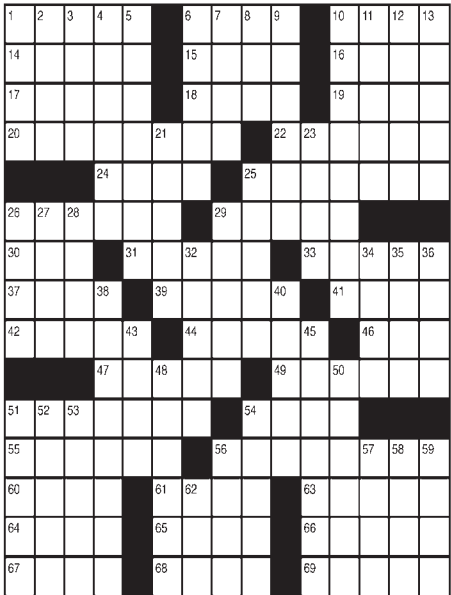
Sudoku is a number-placing puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that each row, each column and each 3x3 box contains the same number only once. The difficulty level of the Conceptis Sudoku increases from Monday to Sunday.

Yesterday's puzzle answer

4	2	8	5	9	7	1	6	3
1	3	7	8	4	6	9	5	2
6	9	5	3	2	1	4	8	7
8	1	6	2	7	5	3	4	9
5	4	9	1	3	8	2	7	6
2	7	3	4	6	9	8	1	5
3	6	2	7	8	4	5	9	1
9	8	1	6	5	3	7	2	4
7	5	4	9	1	2	6	3	8

ACROSS

- 1 ___ for; chose
6 Actor Everett
10 Part of a tooth
14 Lasso loop
15 Animal pelt
16 "___ bigger and better things!"
17 Thrill
18 "___ girl!"; new parents' cry
19 Flying saucers, for short
20 Soft drinks
22 Fox or foxhound
24 Afternoon socials
25 Hoodlum
26 Mean woman in a fairy tale
29 "An ___ of prevention is worth..."
30 Misery
31 Bleacher levels
33 ___ down; diets successfully
37 Black-___ peas
39 Wise men
41 ___ up; absorb
42 Bank vaults
44 Xenon & argon
46 Nintendo video game console
47 Police car's blaring device
49 Competitors
51 Indulgent grandma, often
54 Cougar
55 19th-century U.S. President
56 Meekness
60 In addition
61 Fashionable
63 Agile; nimble
64 In ___ of; as a substitute for
65 Sound the horn
66 Like some elephants
67 Plenty
68 Baseball's Mel and his family
69 Takes a nap



Created by Jacqueline E. Mathews

12/18/14

Wednesday's Puzzle Solved

ARE	SCALD	SNIP
SERB	PIXIE	CELL
SAGA	OVENS	HALE
PORPOISES	ITSA	
RILL	ELS	
AGREES	ATREMBLE	
HAULS	CRATE	LOB
EBBS	HUMPS	WACO
ALE	PORES	PECAN
DESERTED	WEEKLY	
DOC	SANK	
GLOW	ARCHITECT	
NOVA	KARAT	NAIL
USER	ERODE	DARE
SEND	SEWER	NET

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12/18/14

- 38 ___ of; wanting
40 Watery part of the blood
43 Fodder tower
45 Alike
48 Resound
50 Suitcase
51 Tiny
- 52 FDR's affliction
53 Beginning
54 Hockey disks
56 Helpful clue
57 "___ what it is"
58 This and ___
59 Strong urges
62 Extremely spicy

DOWN

- 1 On ___ own; independent

US wealth gap is widest in at least 30 years

PATRICIA COHEN

© 2014 New York Times

The wealthy are getting wealthier. As for everyone else, no such luck.

A report released Wednesday by the Pew Research Center found that the wealth gap between the country's top 20 percent of earners and the rest of America had stretched to its widest point in at least three decades. Last year, the median net worth of upper-income families reached \$639,400, nearly seven times as much of those in the middle, and nearly 70 times the level of those at the bottom of the income ladder. There has been growing attention to the issue of income inequality, particularly the plight of those earning the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour or close to it. But while income and wealth are related (the more you make, the more you can save and invest), the wealth gap zeroes in on a different aspect of financial well-being: how much money and other assets you have accumulated over time, including the value of your home and car plus any investments in stocks, bonds and the like. Think of it as "a measure of the family 'nest egg,'" as Pew calls it - a hoard that can sustain a household during an emergency, like the loss of a job, and in the long run can see someone through retirement.

The wealth gap "exposes varying degrees of vulnerability," said Valerie Wilson, an economist at the Economic Policy Institute, a left-of-center research group in Washington, adding that it also was passed down through the generations.

While those at the top have managed to recoup much of the wealth lost during the economic downturn, middle-income families have not made any gains. "The Great Recession destroyed a significant amount of middle-income and lower-income families' wealth."

Classifieds

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24/7

Report: Arctic loses snow, ice; absorbs more heat

SETH BORENSTEIN

AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Arctic and its future are looking dimmer every year, a new federal report says. In the spring and summer of 2014, Earth's icy northern region lost more of its signature whiteness that reflects the sun's heat. It was replaced temporarily with dark land and water that absorbs more energy, keeping yet more heat on already warming planet, according to the Arctic report card issued Thursday. Spring snow cover in Eurasia reached a record low in April.

Arctic summer sea ice, while not setting a new record, continued a long-term, steady decline. And Greenland set a record in August for the least amount of sunlight reflected in that month, said the peer-reviewed report from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and other agencies. Overall, the report card written by 63 scientists from 13 countries shows few single-year dramatic changes, unlike other years.

"We can't expect records every year. It need not be spectacular for the Arctic to continue to be changing," said report lead editor Martin Jeffries, an Arctic scientist for the Office of Naval Research, at a San Francisco news conference Wednesday.

The report illustrates instead a relentless decline in cold, snow and ice conditions and how they combine with each other. And several of those have to do with how the Arctic reflects sun heat.

The Arctic's drop in reflectivity is crucial because "it plays a role like a thermostat in regulating global climate," Jeffries said, in



This undated photo provided by NOAA shows a polar bear standing on ice. In the spring and summer of 2014, Earth's icy northern region lost more of its signature whiteness that reflects the sun's heat.

Associated Press

an interview. As the bright areas are replaced, even temporarily, with dark heat-absorbing dark areas, "That has global implications."

The world's thermostat setting gets nudged up a bit because more heat is being absorbed instead of reflected, he said.

The Arctic has been affected more by man-made warming than the rest of the globe, Jeffries and the report said. But it comes in

spurts, pauses and drops. Not every year will be a record, Jeffries said.

For example, the Arctic sea ice's lowest point this year wasn't as small as 2012 and was only the sixth lowest since 1979. But the last eight years have all had the eight lowest amounts of summer sea ice on record, Jeffries said.

While Greenland's ice sheet lost 474 billion tons of ice in 2012, it only lost 6

billion tons in the past summer, the report said. While the U.S. East Coast shivered during January's cold snap from a polar vortex that slipped south, parts of Alaska were 18 degrees (10 Celsius) warmer than normal.

Polar bear populations in parts of the Alaska region were shrinking but elsewhere they were more or less stable, the report said. "Eight years ago, 2014

would have been considered an alarming year," said University of Colorado ice scientist Ted Scambos, who didn't contribute to the report. "With 2007 and 2012 behind us, not so much now. The continued summertime darkening of Greenland, particularly in a year when surface melt did not reach record levels, is worrisome, and sets up the potential for record surface melting in future years." □

The D'oh of Homer: Professors employ TV's Simpsons

FRANK ELTMAN

Associated Press

HEMPSTEAD, New York (AP)

— Bart and Lisa Simpson have been in elementary school for 25 years. But that hasn't stopped them from showing up on college campuses.

Universities across the U.S. are using satirical references from "The Simpsons" to grab students' attention and convey lessons in literature and all manner of popular culture.

"If the references are important enough to be lampooned by 'The Simpsons,' these works must be important cultural milestones," says Hofstra University adjunct English professor Richard Pioreck, who has been incorporating the denizens of Springfield into his courses for about a decade.

He currently teaches a course about the Broadway theater and how "The Simpsons" have embraced various musicals and plays. Next semester, he shifts to an online literature course titled "The D'oh of Homer" that includes readings from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," and Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" — all referenced in "Simpsons" episodes.

"Teachers need to keep things fresh," says Denise Du Verenay, an adjunct



In this Dec. 1, 2014, photograph in Hempstead, N.Y., Richard Pioreck, adjunct professor of English, creative writing and literature at Hofstra University, discusses how he uses "The Simpsons" television show and its use of references to Broadway and literature to teach his students.

Associated Press

English professor at St. Xavier University in Chicago, co-author of the book "The Simpsons in the Classroom: Embiggening the Learning Experience with the Wisdom of Springfield."

"They need to reach students however they can. And using 'The Simpsons' to grab their attention, I think, is brilliant," she says. "Fighting against pop culture isn't going to do anyone any good."

In recent years, other universities have had courses focused on the primetime show — which celebrates

its 25th anniversary on Wednesday — including Oswego State University in New York and San Jose State University in California.

Longtime "Simpsons" executive producer Al Jean says he's not surprised professors have embraced the program. "Some people may think we are very vulgar, but then they find there is a lot of warmth and emotion and many people are surprised at the intelligence of some of the jokes," he says. Pioreck says he decided to use the show after a friend

of his daughter's passed an exam on "The Devil and Daniel Webster" by watching a "Simpsons" episode that focused on the story. He found that the sitcom usually aims for more than just the easy punchlines, with writers layering the plotlines with humor that can be appreciated by lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow audiences alike. For example, in one episode that parodied "A Streetcar Named Desire" ("A Streetcar Named Marge"), the dynamics of Homer and Marge Simp-

son's marriage are deftly illustrated through a comparison to the relationship of the couple in the play, Stella and Stanley.

"The Simpsons' do a great deal of parodying, whether it's a complete script or a number here or there," Pioreck says. "Quite often they choose family relationships; what makes a man a success is one of the things that we pursue. And you can see what happens to Homer. Even though it looks like he's not a good father, he steps up and he comes through in the end." Jean acknowledges a theme in many episodes is the comparison of the C. Montgomery Burns character — the miserly owner of Springfield's nuclear power plant — to the lead character in the Orson Welles movie "Citizen Kane," Charles Foster Kane.

"Mr. Burns ... he doesn't have fulfillment in his life even though he's the richest person in town," Pioreck says. "Here are two people who have it all, they have more money than they know what to do with and yet they're not happy. Homer has no money, but has friends and family."

Almost incredibly, at least one young Hofstra student confesses she'd never seen the sitcom before signing up for the Simpsons-Broadway course.

Van Zandt fretted directing Springsteen in 'Lilyhammer'

LAURI NEFF

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP)

— It's always a bit uncomfortable having to tell your boss what to do.

So imagine how Steven Van Zandt felt when he directed his longtime friend and E Street Band mate Bruce Springsteen when The Boss made his acting debut — appearing in the third season finale of the Netflix dramedy "Lilyhammer." (Springsteen also briefly appeared in the 2000 film "High Fidelity," but

as himself rather than in an acting role).

He says he was honored that Springsteen agreed to appear in the episode, which began airing on Nov. 21 and marked Van Zandt's directorial debut, but there was "a little bit of anxiety involved."

"I know we're friends for 50 years but still it meant a lot to me that he chose me and trusted me enough to direct him when literally everybody on earth's been wanting to do it," said Van Zandt, who stars, writes,

produces and composes music for the show.

"Lilyhammer" is a fish out of water story about fictional New York gangster Frank "The Fixer" Tagliano (Van Zandt), who is trying to start a new life in the Norwegian city of Lillehammer.

Springsteen played Frank's older brother Giuseppe — a small role that was key to the plot, Van Zandt said. "He's really acting," says Van Zandt. "It's not some cameo. He's not playing himself. It's a real thing." Van Zandt says it all went



In this Nov. 19, 2013 file photo, actor and musician Steven Van Zandt attends a screening of the Netflix television series "Lilyhammer," in New York.

Associated Press

well and Springsteen "did great" as Giuseppe. "Was it fun? Yeah, but it's

more fun when it's over," he says with a laugh. "It's fun now."



This Oct. 27, 2010 file photo shows, actor Randy Quaid, left, and his wife Evgenia outside their lawyer's office in Vancouver.

Associated Press

Without U.S. passports, Actor Quaid, wife grounded

WASHINGTON (AP) — Actor Randy Quaid and his wife Evgenia are suing John Kerry and the State Department in a so-far unsuccessful effort to recover passports that the government revoked three years ago. The State Department said it takes U.S. passports for reasons including issuance of a felony arrest warrant, fraud, failure to pay child support or a criminal court order barring departure from the country.

Randy Quaid said the revocation involved an issue over "an insurance policy that we did not take out," but declined to discuss it further.

The Quaids have a lengthy series of legal problems, including a felony warrant for burglary and defrauding an innkeeper issued in Santa Barbara, California, for Quaid and his wife after authorities received a complaint that the couple hadn't paid a \$10,000 hotel tab. □

Black Captain America leading comic book diversity



In this June 30, 2011 file photo, editor in chief Axel Alonso poses at Marvel Comics in New York. Marvel Comics and DC Comics are leading a push for diversity in their industry's mainstream characters. The new black Captain America comic book debuted in November.

Associated Press

Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — For decades, comic books have been in color, but now they truly reflect all the hues of American so-

ciety. The new Captain America is black. A Superman who is suspiciously similar to President Barack Obama recently headlined a comic book. Thor is a woman, Spider-Man is part-Puerto Rican and Ms. Marvel is Muslim.

Mainstream comic book superheroes — America's modern mythology — have been redrawn from the stereotypical brown-haired, blue-eyed white male into a world of multi-colored, multireligious and multigendered crusaders to reflect a greater diversity in their audience.

Society has changed, so superheroes have to as well, said Axel Alonso, editor in chief at Marvel Comics, who in November debuted Captain America No. 1 with Samuel Wilson, the first African American superhero taking over Captain America's red, white and blue uniform and shield. □

Martha Plimpton: 'I don't want to be just famous'



In this Sept. 23, 2012 file photo, actress Martha Plimpton presents an award at the 64th Primetime Emmy Awards at the Nokia Theatre in Los Angeles. Plimpton appears in the Broadway play, "A Delicate Balance."

Associated Press

MARK KENNEDY
AP Drama Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — To the audience watching the opening act of "A Delicate Balance" on Broadway, a gentle word of warning: Martha Plimpton is listening to you.

The actress is backstage at the Golden Theatre with some time to kill before she appears in Act 2 and she likes to hear the way the crowd is sounding as she puts on her wig and gets into costume.

"I try to get a feel for how they are responding and what they're like. Not that it makes any difference

to my performance, but it's nice to have warning," she says. "I listen to the other actors. I listen to what they're doing. I notice variations or things that might get a different laugh."

The extra time backstage turns out not to be so strange, she says. "It's actually quite nice. Normally, you'd think I'd be really freaked out. I thought it would make me anxious, but I'm not."

Once onstage, though, Plimpton is a force of nature. She melts down, screams insults and threatens to use a gun. "I have a very specific task, which is

to come in and wreak havoc," the actress says.

Edward Albee's 1967 Pulitzer Prize-winning play takes an upper class, suburban WASP family to the breaking point over a weekend. Plimpton plays a daughter who returns home after fleeing another broken relationship.

Plimpton stars alongside John Lithgow and Glenn Close in the revival, which is her first time tackling Albee. She calls it "one of the more challenging roles I've ever played."

That's saying something for a woman who has seemingly mastered everything in show business, from series TV like "Raising Hope" to musical comedy "Pal Joey" to film drama like "I Shot Andy Warhol."

What can't she play? "I can't play a 27-year-old ingénue," says the 44-year-old. "The most any actor can hope for is a career that has some longevity and also has some variety. I am fortunate to have both."

Reviews of the Albee revival have been generally good but not fawning. In any case, Plimpton hasn't read them: "If you read the good ones and you believe them, it messes with your head. If you read the bad ones and you believe them, it messes with your head. It's just better to stay as neutral as possible."

Plimpton was literally born in the business: Her parents — actors Keith Carradine and Shelley Plimpton — met while touring with "Hair." Plimpton's first breakout role was as a teen in 1984's "The Goonies" with Sean Astin and Corey Feldman. Steady work for the character actress followed.

"I made a deal with myself sort of relatively young that I would pursue this work in as authentic a manner as I could. And that means that I want it to be fun and challenging and interesting," she says. "I don't want to be just famous. And I don't want to be just rich." □

Elton John, David Furnish to tie knot again



A Wednesday Dec. 21, 2005 photo from files showing pop star Elton John, right, and his longtime partner David Furnish, after they had a civil ceremony at the Guildhall in Windsor, England.

Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Elton John and his partner David Furnish plan to tie the knot for a second time, following

the legalization of same-sex marriage in Britain.

The singer's spokesman, Gary Farrow, said Wednesday that the weekend ceremony will be private. Same-sex couples have been allowed to marry in Britain since March. Previously, gay couples could

form civil partnerships, which carried the same legal status as marriage but without the title. □

In Praise of Small Miracles



DAVID BROOKS
© 2014 New York Times

Most of us don't save enough. When governments try to encourage saving, they usually enact big policies to increase the incentives. But, in Kenya, people were given a lockable metal box - a simple place to put their money. After one year, the people with metal boxes increased savings by so much that they had 66 percent more money available to pay for health emergencies. It would have taken a giant tax reform to produce a shift in behavior that large.

Too many people die in auto accidents. When governments try to reduce highway deaths, they generally increase safety regulations. But, also in Kenya, stickers were placed inside buses and vans urging passengers to scream at automobile drivers they saw driving dangerously. The heckling discouraged dangerous driving by an awesome amount. Insurance claims involving injury or death fell to half of their previous levels.

These are examples of a new kind of policymaking that is sweeping the world. The old style was based on the notion that human beings are rational actors who respond in straightforward ways to incentives. The new style, which supplements but does not replace the old style, is based on the obvious point that human beings are not always rational actors. Sometimes we're mentally lazy, or stressed, or we're influenced by social pressure and unconscious biases. It's possible to take advantage of these features to enact change.

For example, people hate losing things more than they like getting things, a phenomenon known as loss aversion. In some schools, teachers were offered a bonus at the end of their year if they could improve student performance. This kind of merit pay didn't improve test scores. But, in other schools, teachers were given a bonus at the beginning of the year, which would effectively be taken away if their students didn't improve. This loss-framed bonus had a big effect.

People are also guided by decision-making formats. The people who administer the ACT college admissions test used to allow students to send free score reports to three colleges. Many people thus applied to three colleges. But then the ACT folks changed the form so there were four lines where you could write down prospective colleges. That tiny change meant that many people applied to four colleges instead of three. Some got into more prestigious schools they

wouldn't have otherwise. This improved the expected earnings of low-income students by about \$10,000.

The World Bank has just issued an amazingly good report called "Mind, Society and Behavior" on how the insights of behavioral economics can be applied to global development and global health. The report, written by a team led by Karla Hoff and Varun Gauri, lists many policies that have already been tried and points the way to many more.

Sugar cane farmers in India receive most of their income once a year, at harvest time. In the weeks before harvest, when they are poor and stressed, they score 10 points lower on IQ tests than in the weeks after. If you schedule fertilizer purchase decisions and their children's school enrollment decisions during the weeks after harvest, they will make more farsighted choices than at other times of the year. This simple policy change is based on an understanding of how poverty depletes mental resources.

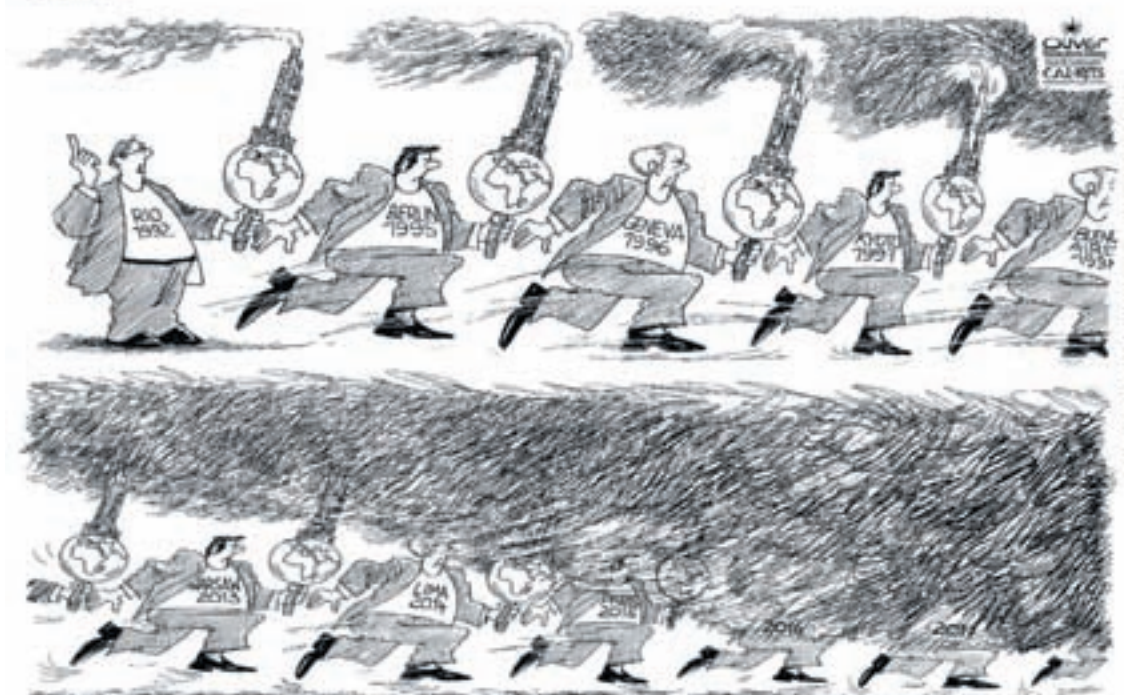
In Zambia, hairdressers were asked to sell female condoms to their clients. Some were offered financial incentives to do so, but these produced no results. In other salons, top condom sellers had a gold star placed next to their names on a poster that all could see. More than twice as many condoms were sold. This simple change was based on an understanding of the human desire for status and admiration.

The policies informed by behavioral economics are delicious because they show how cheap changes can produce big effects. Policymakers in this mode focus on discrete opportunities to exploit, not vast problems to solve.

This corrects for a bias in the way governments often work. They tend to gravitate toward the grand and the abstract. For example, the United Nations is now replacing the Millennium Development Goals, which expire in 2015, with the Sustainable Development Goals.

"The Millennium Development Goals are concrete, measurable and have an end-date, so they could serve as a rallying point," says Suprotik Basu, the chief executive of the MDG Health Alliance. "One good thing about the Sustainable Development Goals is that they're being written through a bottom-up consensus process. But sometimes the search for consensus leads you higher and higher into the clouds. The jury is out on whether we will wind up with goals concrete enough to help ministers make decisions and decide priorities."

Behavioral economics policies are beautiful because they are small and concrete but powerful. They remind us that when policies are rooted in actual human behavior and specific day-to-day circumstances, even governments can produce small miracles.



The Imitation of Marriage



ROSS DOUTHAT
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In the past two weeks, my colleagues at The Times' data-driven project, The Upshot, have offered two ways of looking at the most important cleavage in America - the divide, cultural and economic, between the college educated and the struggling working class.

The first article, by Claire Cain Miller, discussed the striking decline in divorce rates among well-educated Americans, whose families seem to have adapted relatively successfully to the sexual revolution and the postindustrial economy.

The second, by Binyamin Appelbaum, looked at the decline of work itself among less-educated men, and the forces driving this decline: low wages and weak job growth, the availability of safety-net income, the burden of criminal records, and the fraying of paternal and marital bonds. Appelbaum's piece is a great jumping-off point for arguments about how policy might improve the fortunes of the unemployed and the working class. But the two articles read together also raise a crucial cultural question: To what extent can the greater stability of upper-class family life, and the habits that have made it possible, be successfully imitated further down the socioeconomic ladder?

Many optimistic liberals believe not only that such imitation is possible, but that what needs to be imitated most are the most socially progressive elements of the new upper class' way of life:

delayed marriage preceded by romantic experimentation, more-interchangeable roles for men and women in breadwinning and child rearing, a more emotionally open and egalitarian approach to marriage and parenting.

The core idea here is that working-class men, in particular, need to let go of a particular image of masculinity - the silent, disciplined provider, the churchgoing paterfamilias - that no longer suits the times. Instead, they need to become more comfortable as part-time homemakers, as emotionally available soul mates, and they need to raise their children to be more adaptive and expressive, to prepare them for a knowledge-based, constantly-in-flux economy.

Like most powerful ideas, this argument is founded on real truths. For Americans of every social class, the future of marriage will be more egalitarian, with more shared burdens and blurrier divisions of labor, or it will not be at all. And the broad patterns of upper-class family life do prepare children for knowledge-based work in ways that working-class family life does not.

But the idea that progressive attitudes can save working-class marriages also has some real problems. First, it underestimates the effective social conservatism of the upper-class model of family life - the resilience of traditional gender roles in work and child rearing, the continued role of religion in stabilizing well-educated family life, and the conservative messages encoded even in the most progressive education.

Notwithstanding their more egalitarian attitudes, for instance, college-educated households still tend to have male primary breadwinners: As the University of Virginia's Brad Wilcox points out, college-educated husbands and fathers earn about 70 percent of their family's income on average, about the same percentage as working-class married couples.

The college-educated are also now more likely to attend church than other Americans, and are much less likely to cohabit before marriage than couples without a high school degree. And despite

a rhetorical emphasis on Emersonian self-reliance, children reared and educated in the American meritocracy arguably learn a different sort of lesson - the hyper-supervised caution of what my colleague David Brooks once dubbed "the organization kid."

Meanwhile, as cohabitation and churchgoing trends suggest, many working-class Americans - men very much included - have gone further in embracing progressive models of identity and behavior than many realize, and reaped relatively little reward for that embrace.

Near the end of "Labor's Love Lost," his illuminating new book on the decline of the working-class family, the Johns Hopkins sociologist Andrew Cherlin cites research suggesting that many working-class men, far from being trapped in an antique paradigm of "restricted emotional language," have actually thrown themselves into therapeutic, "spiritual but not religious" questing, substituting Oprah-esque self-help for more traditional forms of self-conceiving and belonging.

Cherlin, working from progressive premises, sees this as potentially good news: a sign that these men are getting over Gary Cooper and preparing to embrace the more egalitarian and emotionally open patterns of the upper class.

But given that this shift has coincided with lost ground for blue-collar men, another interpretation seems possible. We may have a culture in which the working class is encouraged to imitate what are sold as key upper-class values - sexual permissiveness and self-fashioning, spirituality and emotivism - when really the upper class is also held together by a kind of secret traditionalism, without whose binding power family life ends up coming apart even faster.

If so, it needs to be more widely acknowledged, and even preached, that what's worth imitating in upper-class family life isn't purely modern or progressive, but a complex synthesis of new and old.

Dutch Flower Auction, Long Industry's Heart, Is Facing Competition

CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE
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AALSMEER, Netherlands - Each weekday morning, the buyers descend on Aalsmeer, about a half-hour southwest of Amsterdam, arriving at an enormous warehouse covering some 2 million square meters. They squeeze onto benches, glare at computer screens and, with the push of a button, bid on an en-

lutionizing the business and upending traditions. "We've had this system that has been very dominant for more than a hundred years that is more or less changing or disappearing," said Herman de Boon, the chairman of the Dutch Flower Wholesale Association. Concerns about carbon dioxide emissions and the cost of jet fuel have steadily squeezed the global transportation network, even as

Even so, the flower industry - still more than 5 percent of the Netherlands' gross domestic product - has been remarkably resilient, adapting to its changing climate far faster than many of its flowers have. Geert Hageman, a veteran tulip grower, explained why, for instance, Triflor, his tulip business, had not suffered even during Europe's lingering economic troubles. Because people have

nice," Hageman said happily. But while big Dutch producers like Triflor, which can grow 1.2 million stems at a time, are doing well, many smaller growers, especially those that depend on expensive greenhouses, have been pruned from the marketplace in recent years. The cooperative FloraHolland represents Dutch and international growers and runs auction and distribu-

would have been inconceivable. As recently as a decade ago, virtually all cut flowers sold to wholesalers were sold here. Last year, only half were. Buyers still come to examine flowers in cooling rooms before the auction starts at 6 a.m. Carefully, they watch an enormous clock that sets the price for flowers, counting down usually from 1 euro per stem. The buyer who pushes a button first tells the auctioneer how many buckets he wishes to purchase at the price selected.

The bidding is concentrated and jealously guarded. A female photographer sent by The New York Times was denied access to the front of the trading floor, unlike a male colleague, who had been granted access. An official FloraHolland guide working in the auction's public relations department said that the photographer would distract the buyers, who are overwhelmingly men. But more of them are buying at a distance, with growers supplying digital photos and data on the length, size and health of flowers.

Hageman estimated that 40 percent of his tulips were now sold before they were grown and harvested, which he said helped him plan for peak periods like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day.

He rarely goes to the auction now, he said. Instead, he follows the action from a terminal in his office, which shows the clock and the price his tulips fetch in Aalsmeer, some 30 miles south. Still, "the auction clock is really important," he said. "It will stay with us." He explained that it gave him and his colleagues a benchmark to set prices for new varieties.

Likewise, more of the flowers, particularly roses, grown by producers who have migrated to Africa or elsewhere never actually see the auction hall.

"The energy cost and the labor cost are the main reason that the roses are grown in Africa these days,"



Geert Hageman in a greenhouse at Triflor, his tulip business, which can grow 1.2 million stems at a time, in Oude Niedorp, Netherlands, in November, 2014. Though the Dutch flower industry is changing rapidly, austere times in Europe have in a way helped, as families jettison big luxuries for smaller ones. "In Europe, if you don't have flowers in the house, it just looks naked," Hageman said. (Iivy Njikiktjen/The New York Times)

cyclopedic array of flowers: everything from amaryllis, chrysanthemums and gerbera to kangaroo paws, roses and, of course, the famed Dutch tulips.

Then, from nearby Schiphol airport, the flowers can be sent across the planet. Today, more than half of the world's cut flowers are bought and sold at the auction here, which has been the hub of the global flower trade since the early 20th century.

But that system, which helped make flowers as synonymous with the Dutch identity as wooden shoes and windmills, is in the midst of an upheaval, buffeted by changes that are revo-

more growers have moved from Europe to warmer, and less expensive, climates in Africa in the last decade.

Then there has been the growth of presales and direct shipping. Today, virtually anyone with an Internet connection and a buyer's license can bid via computer at the auction without actually having to come and inspect the stems.

"It was more fun 10 years ago," Marco Schouten, a buyer for FloriBizz who purchases roses for florists in Italy and Spain, said during a break in the bidding one recent morning. "There was noise and friendship."

less money to pay for vacations and evenings out, he said, they tend to stay home, where they crave a relatively cheap luxury in a time of austerity.

"In Europe, if you don't have flowers in the house, it just looks naked," Hageman said, surveying the work of a half-dozen workers pulling young tulips from movable flower beds at one of his greenhouses in Oude Niedorp, a tiny village about an hour north of Amsterdam.

He also pointed to the opening of fresh markets to satisfy the growing middle classes of Eastern Europe and Russia. "They love flowers over there - it's really

tion centers. It says that from 2008, when the financial crisis started, to 2013, its membership dropped to 4,600 growers from 5,100. At the same time, profits grew to 4.5 billion euros (about \$5.6 billion) a year from 4.1 billion euros, in transactions for 12.4 billion plants and flowers each year.

While that total has remained relatively consistent, the number of items traded at the Aalsmeer auction has actually decreased. This fall, FloraHolland stopped sending its cut flowers to the Aalsmeer auction rooms, to keep them fresher for longer.

Not long ago, such a move